Policy \brief: Higher education and sustainable development

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As a key initiative of Our Common Agenda launched by UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, in 2021, the 2022 Transforming Education Summit (TES) succeeded in promoting education to the top of the global political agenda to address the "triple crisis" of equity and inclusion, quality, and relevance. The primary outcome was a Vision Statement drawing on insights from the Summit and the UNESCO International Commission on the Futures of Education report. The report noted that the TES was a critical step forward, however, is only the beginning. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have a crucial role to play in education for sustainable development to help students, educators and the community develop the skills and knowledge they need to meet the needs of society today without compromising the abilities of future generations.

To support this transformation, the mindset of policymakers and stakeholders, must profoundly change if the transforming education journey is to deliver a breakthrough (UN Report on the 2022 Transforming Education Summit). Stakeholders are required to reimagine HEI not only in terms of curricula but from a whole-institution perspective and make bold changes that support policies which reflect sustainability principles and ensure capacity building for students and educators.

Transforming education

The concept of sustainable development gained recognition with the 1987 Brundtland Report which lay the groundwork for the 1992 Earth Summit and established international political commitment to sustainable development. As a result, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) became a key area of focus within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) culminating in the Talloires Declaration (TD) (1990) which acknowledged the commitment of universities to sustainability and outlined key steps that identified the need to integrate sustainability into education practice and urged HEIs to take action.

The TD and later summits and initiatives including the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development 2015, the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, the UN Common Agenda in 2021, and the Transforming Education Summit 2022, have called on HEI's to rethink higher education models in terms of sustainable development with the SDG 4.7 target of ensuring all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development by 2030. HEIs are essential drivers of ESD and have a critical role to play in terms of sustainability to create the conditions for transformative change and facilitate change across society. (Žalėnienė et al, 2021). Although the call for transformation has been reiterated and much time has passed since the TD, HEIs have been slow to change and meet the demands.

To implement the changes in education, sustainability principles need to be at the heart of HEIs strategy in terms of curricula and operational management and must be incorporated as part of the organisational culture. (Žalėnienė, Pereira, 2021). Consequently. stakeholders are not only called upon to reimagine HEI but also support policies that implement these changes. HEI are ready to assume a more influential role but need to engage in bold transformational processes. It is imperative that stakeholders address governance issues and reimagine their educational models to support their leadership role in achieving the 2030 Agenda. (Coetzer et al, 2023).

Institutional leadership and policy

Given the unique organisational context of HEIs, leadership in sustainability within higher education has the potential to transform institutional practices through stewardship of the institutional mission and strengthening of stakeholder commitment and should be given prominence (Aung, Hallinger, 2023). However, despite the position of HEIs, recent studies have shown they are lagging. In 2021, the European University Association, (EUA) surveyed 372 HEIs in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) on their environmental sustainability and '" greening" practices defined as a process of increasing awareness and concrete action towards a green, environmentally friendly, and resource-efficient university. The report found that while half of the HEIs agreed on the importance of institutional leadership in terms of greening measures, in practice, only a little more than a third have any representation in the leadership team with a further 8% lacking any formal steering programme.

Indeed, the international community call for HEIs involvement in policymaking beyond implementation have been limited and the opportunities for HEIS to realise their full potential in terms of driving sustainability has not been realised. (Kohl et al 2022).

To further understand the organisational change processes that lead to sustainability, a comparative analysis of 13 Austrian public universities across the areas of teaching, research, operations, culture, and societal engagement, found that academics in the field of sustainability studies were the key drivers of organisational change, however, the development of inter-university networking further pushed these transformations which achieved greater success as a result of proactive leadership and ministerial support. (Bohunovsky et al, 2020).

Indeed, while leadership is necessary, the importance of policy frameworks cannot be understated as incorporating sustainability principles into these frameworks is critical to implementing sustainability into the higher education system. However, the EUA survey notes that France is the only country with system-level policies to drive greening activities in higher education institutions with environmental protection law incorporating policy directives and a 'Green Plan" specifically for HEIs, unlike other countries with broader national policies and laws without any reference to higher education. However, as recent studies have shown, HEIs can be influential in terms of EU policymaking and there are opportunities for higher education to support the implementation of sustainability principles as part of a broader agenda. (Paulissen et al. 2022).

Capacity building and Higher Education Institutions

Given the potential of students to support sustainability and the scale of the number of students globally, HEIS are well-positioned to provide education in sustainability. For example, over 235 million students were enrolled in HEIs globally in 2020, more than doubling the 100 million students enrolled in 2000 with the number of HEIs growing by 52% between 2006 and 2018 resulting in an additional 30,000 HEIs (UNESCO Higher Education Global Data Report, 2022). Most students are between 18 and 21 and at a crucial stage of identity development and more susceptible to influence. In addition, given that HEIs are often the last stage of education prior to entering the labour

force, many students will become influential young professionals (Lertpratchya et al., 2017). In this context, HEIs can play an essential role in sustainability as they have the resources to provide valuable skills and knowledge to educate future leaders as well as members of the community.

While Education for Sustainability (ES) is critical in terms of capacity building for students to drive and support the development of sustainable societies, first and foremost, educators need to incorporate ES into their teaching practice. According to the UNESCO 2021 World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development, educators are powerful agents of change to deliver the educational response to sustainable development. However, to drive this transition to more sustainable societies, educators need to acquire the knowledge, skills, and mindset to support such a transformation. Consequently, HEIs must integrate ESD into faculty training, to not only teach about sustainability and conduct related research but also apply a sustainability lens to the professional development programmes for educators and staff members. To facilitate such outcomes, the European Commission in 2022 called for environmental sustainability to be at the core of EU education and training systems and the Council of the European Union (EU) adopted the "Recommendation on learning for the green transition and sustainable development" which outlines how sustainability can be integrated into education and training.

Indeed, integrating sustainability into the curriculum of existing programmes and developing competences in sustainability with students has been a significant challenge for HEIs. In a 2022 study of the University of the Basque Country, the report noted that while environmental awareness is part of the environmental science disciplines and social commitment to sustainability in the social sciences, competences related to critical thinking about sustainability were reported by teachers with familiarity of the 2020 Agenda who use active methodologies in their practice, however, sustainability was noted as having no relation to teaching by 28% of teachers less familiar with the agenda. While this is a regional example, it highlights the types of issues experienced in developing competences across HEIs.

Recommendation

To transform education and reach the SDG 4.7 target, HEI leadership and policy frameworks need to reflect the requirements for transformative thinking in existing programs and organisational processes so that sustainable development becomes a normative aspect of life. A focus on capacity-building for educators and student is key to this transformation.

The recommendation is to implement the following:

- integrate sustainability into teaching across all aspects of operations and not just curricula.

- include sustainability as a core concept in higher education policies nationally and globally.

- incorporate capacity building and training to provide learners and educators with the knowledge and skills to support a sustainable society.

- create a shared understanding on the transformative developments required in education and training for sustainability and the green transition.

- create multidisciplinary and networking opportunities for collaboration and learning around sustainability.

- complete a whole of institution sustainability assessment to ensure that approaches meet the needs of students and educators.

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