

Sustainability Governance at Universities: A Multi-Case Study in Germany

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Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions: develop – network – report

- Collaboration of **eleven German Higher Education Institutions** (HEI) in order to multiply, refine and expand expert knowledge and process skills for sustainable development.
- All partners are **dedicated to create a strong inter- and transdisciplinary network** on research as well as applied topics of sustainability.
- The HOCH-N network is an **open innovation platform** for all who are interested in participating.

Fields of action

Governance

FU Berlin
Team Bormann

University Vechta
Team Rieckmann

Research

Leuphana
Lüneburg
Team Lang

LMU München
Team Vogt

Transfer

HS Eberswalde
Team Nölting

Teaching

University Bremen
Team Müller-Christ

University
Tübingen
Team Potthast

Coordination

Uni Hamburg
Team Bassen &
Schmitt

**Campus/
Operations**

TU Dresden
Team Günther

HS Zittau-Görlitz
Team Delakowitz

**Sustainability
Reporting**

University
Hamburg
Team Bassen

FU Berlin
Team de Haan

University
Duisburg-Essen
Team Niemann

Networking

Uni Hamburg
Team Schmitt

Uni Bremen
Team Müller-Christ


**Expert committee
& multiplier**





**international
connections**

**partner
universities**

Sustainability Governance at HEI: Rationale

- Universities play a crucial role for promoting sustainable development by addressing sustainability through their major functions of education, research and outreach (Fadeeva and Mochizuki, 2010; Müller-Christ et al., 2014; Wals et al.; 2016).
- However, the inquiry of underlying processes and structures, actor constellations and sensitivities of SD implementation at HEI – the sustainability governance – is rather rarely dealt with (Baker-Shelley et al., 2017; Dlouhá et al., 2016; Mader et al., 2013; Spira et al., 2013).
- Research seems to have paid “minimal attention to either critical strategic level dynamics or reflexive activities that could facilitate and accelerate change” (Stephens and Graham, 2010).

Sustainability Governance at HEI: Research focus

- How do universities deal with the request to institutionalise sustainability?
- In which ways and practices do universities acquire sustainability?
- Which conditions are required to institutionalise sustainability?

Theoretical Background: Governance Equalizer

Politics	From selective support... to a long-term agenda setting	embeddedness and legitimacy of sustainability
Profession	From a narrow professional perspective... to multi-professionality	interconnectedness of professional perspectives
Organisation	From projects ... to networking and collective action	cooperation and collaboration within the HEI
Knowledge	From isolated use of data ... to joint and reflexive perspective	gaining and usage of necessary knowledge and competence
Public	From little attention for sustainability ... to public discussion and high interest	awareness of the necessity of sustainability

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Methodological approach I: Expert Interviews

10 **exploratory expert interviews**

- Aim: revise the chosen heuristics and disclose the potential implications and objectives of university sustainability in terms of the five equalizer dimensions
- Sample: individuals who are known in the German higher education landscape as promoters of sustainability at HEIs; represent different approaches, functions and perspectives on sustainability processes → students, researchers/teachers or managers as well as external advisors or policy consultants
- Content: loosely structured interview guide that engage with the interviewees' personal conception of and experience with sustainability at HEIs and test the specific relevance of each of the five equalizer dimensions

Methodological approach II: Stakeholder Interviews

63 qualitative stakeholder interviews

- Aim: disclosure of practiced sustainability governance at HEIs, identification of typical processes and structures as well as the types of relations between the central actors
- Sample: within the eleven universities collaborating in the HOCH N network, representatives of five HEI status groups were interviewed – the top management level, student initiatives, the technical administration, academic staff like professors or researchers, and (if existent) a sustainability commissioner or similar
- Content: questions concerning the development and assessment of the sustainability agenda within the university and the people involved
- Data analysis: structured qualitative content analysis with the aim to identify and develop about three different HEI types of sustainability implementation

Preliminary Insights from Stakeholder Interviews I

Development of the Sustainability Process

- SD at HEIs is often initially established in a single sector and in relation to operational environmental management (campus greening)
- EMAS (Eco-management and Audit Scheme) functions as a temporary catalyst for SD processes and the building of structures.

The Understanding of Sustainability

- The perspectives on sustainability at HEIs differ especially in terms of whether they regard sustainability as a delegable management task or as a comprehensive goal setting for all areas
- The complex task of SD requires an operationalization; however, the sharing of responsibility for SD often goes hand in hand with individual responsibility

Preliminary Insights from Stakeholder Interviews II

Actors of Sustainability Processes

- Students play an important role as initiators, drivers and contributors; but it is a challenge to institutionalize student engagement
- The university management seems to regard SD either as a "matter for the boss" or as a "broadly shared joint task".
- The support of the university management is very desirable; however, sole top-down management of the SD processes creates a lack of acceptance among other actors
- An orientation towards scientific excellence rarely seems compatible with a whole-institution approach.

Preliminary Insights from Stakeholder Interviews III

External Influences

- Because of their institutional complexity, large universities often face more difficulties for implementing SD than small HEIs. They also tend to have greater institutional inertia.
- The regional location (urban vs. rural) as well as the integration of the HEI into the regional structures play a decisive role. In rural areas, HEI are naturally recognized as a major player in regional development.
- Hindering conditions exist in particular in the competition of SD with other topics at universities, the predominantly disciplinary research funding and (often too little) basic and sustainability-related funding of the HEI.
- Sustainability processes are confronted with different institutional self-interests (adherence to existing structures, own rights and responsibilities) and intrinsic logics (disciplinary self-understanding and understanding of SD, different "languages", orientation to hierarchy or freedom of science).

Preliminary conclusion and next steps

- Insights on processes and structures, actor constellations and sensitivities of SD implementation at HEI
- Next steps:
 - Clustering of universities on the basis of their strategies (strategy types)
 - Elaborating a manual / guide

Thank you!

Find more information on our website: www.hoch-n.org/en