Fostering Sustainability at Universities: Mechanisms and Incentives

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The global policy for human rights, for climate and for biodiversity combined with the Global Action Programme for education for sustainable development pose a single process. Sustainability, as an overarching goal, not only demands from all states, but also from all members of the civil society, courageous actions to reflect, and, if necessary, to change everyone's personal behaviour. Institutions also have to reflect on their situation, to decide on courses of improvement, and to monitor the progress. Sustainability is an imperative to save the world for future human existence and well-being and viability of the biosphere. The plenum of the UN set the framework on September 2015 when adopting the "Agenda 2030".

When adopting these Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), none of the 17 goals named Science as a special challenge – quite clearly because science and research aren't part of the problems regarding a better future, but quite contrary keys to solve these challenges. This indeed was the main reason why UN general secretary Ban Ki-Moon appointed a Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) consisting of 26 world famous scientists to advise him in looking for solutions for a sustainable future.

Professor Jörg Hacker, president of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and SAB-member ad personam quoted: "Science is essential concerning the 'Agenda 2030', and a sustainable development. By its nature science is quite more than a mere instrument to implement and further develop already existing solutions. Room for creativity and promotion of basic research are important to walk new ways. They are the source of innovation."

"The UNESCO Science Report: Towards 2030", published in November 2015, underlines his statement very well. This 800 pages document illustrates, how UN member states are performing in their respective strategies for a sustainable future.

These few remarks may suffice to state that the only answer to your overarching question "Do universities matter – in connecting communities for sustainability?" is: "Yes they do!" Presuming that this position has been your personal stimulus to participate in this spring campus, I shall now try to explain what we in Germany are currently discussing, concerning the links between sustainability, education and science.

The Council for Sustainable Development, a body of 15 representatives nominated by the chancellor, Mrs. Merkel, has the duty of advising the German government, to take actions promoting sustainability. For this reason, position papers are formulated, e.g. on sustainable consumption, land use and financial sustainability. At the same time the Council initiates public campaigns aiming at more sustainability in all sectors of our society.

The general guideline is: How may we enhance and promote sustainability nationally and internationally? Usually we define goals, than monitor the status quo, to formulate a picture of where we are. With this point of origin, we then are able to define the different sprints to realize the goals, and we decide on a transparent monitoring system.

Given the important role the economic sector plays in striving for more sustainability, the Council published the "German Code for Sustainability" (Deutscher Nachhaltigkeitskodex) two years ago showcasing indicators for measuring the status of sustainability and the sprints accomplished. Meanwhile nearly 200 companies adopted the principles of the codex. They obligated themselves to publish regular reports regarding the progress in sustainable production and administration.

It is remarkable, that the banking as well as the assurance sector are more and more taking into consideration environmental and social data, when judging future economic and financial stability, and competitive chances of companies. Special investment funds prioritising sustainable values which improve financially better than traditional values. Not only in the long run sustainability and profitability prove to have a chance as a winning team. More and more the ranking of competitive performance is also decided by sustainability standards. Already now aspects of sustainability motivate researchers, employees and clients. Sustainability seems to become a part of future power to compete.

A lot of people say, "The economy is the economy, but we are the science sector." Why or how should this reference matter? Once more I stress that there will either be a sustainable world tomorrow – with fundamental input and support by the science sector or we will all find ourselves in a world unable to sustain mankind. My firm conviction, is that the sustainable future itself will be the driving motivation, not only in media and the public debate, but and especially as a stimulating motivation for students, researchers and the whole educational and science sector.

Hence we should carve out what we can learn from other sectors, economy included, and where necessary adapt it to respect the special needs of free and independent research and

science. Everybody should acknowledge in any case that learning, teaching and research are fundamentally shaped by the requisites of world development. Basic research is at the same time a precondition and a consequence of a multifaceted, diverse and free society. But free societies will only survive as sustainable societies. This is a reciprocal relationship.

During the UNESCO decade „Education for Sustainable Development" (ESD) 2005 – 14 plenty of research and management projects have been realised in the academic sector, including interdisciplinary research for global sustainability. You may get an impression of these exemplary activities, examples of "good practice" facilitating sustainability in universities, by reading a small booklet published by the German commission for UNESCO in 2014 titled "Hochschulen für eine nachhaltige Entwicklung" (Universities for Sustainable Development). Increasingly students ask for more sustainability in courses, demand to know how sustainable the institution is they are studying in. Some universities founded even "Centres for Expertise" with the special task to promote ESD. Pilot research projects were started. In 2009 a memorandum on ESD was signed by the Conference of university rectors and the German commission for UNESCO.

In 2012 especially a lot of innovative research projects were initiated. Although the government did not proclaim 2012 a year of sustainability, more than a few academic activists conceived and used the then given financial subsidies as exactly that. University networks were created, some universities nominated officers for sustainability. Step by step a new sustainability ambience developed. Yet in the totality of the education sector all these commendable activities did not experience a broad medial echo. But educational and academic institutions count among the key drivers of transformation. Therefore it is more than consequent that there is now a call for a „whole-institution-approach".

What does this mean for universities in their role as agents of change? Are there special mechanisms and helpful incentives to support institutional changes of universities? Last year the Council for Sustainable Development organised conferences and workshops to devise answers for university-adequate solutions. As you may imagine, these discussions, like all academic discussions, were not only intense, but of very principal character concerning the basic relation between freedom of research and sustainability as well as more practical questions concerning responsibilities and organisational structures within the universities.

You all know that these discussions need their time. Despite all efforts to achieve consensus, different ideas remain and will stimulate the now starting test process. A very fundamental discussion was about the question, if the mentioned Sustainable Development Code (SDC) concerning companies could be a blueprint at all or just a guideline for more sustainable universities.

Finally, a diplomatic compromise was proposed, to take the criteria-framework of the above mentioned SDC. Because the SDC is an existing and already introduced instrument.

This pragmatic position should not be confused at all with the fundamental wish to identify the significant academic specialties. Clearly many universities lack sufficient data reflecting the status quo. Existing reports are therefore often incomplete. Yet defining goals and targets is empty notions, if you are not able to define the initial situation, to develop indicators for measurement of progresses, to monitor, to control and to correct wrong or insufficient developments. You need clear and transparent indicators and measuring instruments – and clear responsibilities. Certain fears, that a university code by itself might cement bureaucratic structures, and by this limit the flexibility of structures, were also discussed. It was decided to develop a manual for practical implementation of the codex to avoid irritation.

In the foreword of the drafted "Sustainability Code for Higher Education Institutions" the representatives of 13 academic institutions underline that "every key activity of an institution of higher education (teaching, research, operations and transfer) should be consistently incorporated and correspondingly transformed in light of the sustainable development mission statement."

After the approval of the drafted code from the Council in the beginning of 2016 we now will see an implementation pilot phase undertaken by 13 universities, differing in size and profile. This process is coordinated and steered by Professor de Haan/ Free University of Berlin, also scientific consultant of the Federal Ministry for Education and Research and Professor Bassen/ University of Hamburg and member of the Council for Sustainable Development. Hopefully the Federal Ministry will give financial support for this test phase of one year. We then will have to discuss the results and the final form of the codex.

The added value of a Sustainability Codex for Universities boils down to five crucial points:

- It will be the first reporting standard in Germany.
- The internal responsibility achievements of universities and their respective social impact become transparent for a broader public.
- It supports the internal sustainability management in monitoring, steering and strategic intentions.
- It presents the contributions of universities for the society in comparison to other institutions.
- It enhances through its compressed and user friendly form an easy start in sustainability reporting.

The drafted code has four main criteria: strategy, process management, environment, and society. It would take too much time explaining all the 20 subcriteria important for the proposed regular reporting and monitoring. I only quote the first phrase of subcriteria 1: "The institution of higher education discloses what aspects of sustainability have a material influence on its activities and how it caters to and systematically addresses these

in its strategy." You may study how this applies to all sectors and levels of academic institutions, especially to sustainability in teaching, in research and in operations.

But above all, I should underline that it is the right and duty of each university to define which importance it addresses to the diversity aspects. Some universities may decide to focus on classical aspects of research and lectures, perhaps combined with process management, others may give an equal significance to environment and society. Thus the individual profiles of universities may differ, but in any case the responsibility for sustainable acting and processing in all activities of universities will be monitored and evaluated.

One conclusion seems to be imperative even beforehand. The most important aspect is to realize sustainability in the organisation itself, which is reflected in the personal public commitment of the president or CEO and the governing bodies. Their strategic obligation, their liability are decisive. It depends largely on them if the members of the organisation accept the rules of sustainable practice or not. This is true also for universities. Laws and rules are one thing; the commitment of the governing bodies is the decisive motor.

In universities, even more than in companies, a top down command process will fail, if no bottom up process on all levels and in all units takes place at the same time. Success depends on the motivation of all members of a university, professors, students and administrators, supported by organisational rules of the institution.

The drafted code also explicitly states: "The institution of higher education discloses how its executive organisational units promote and encourage sustainability processes both materially and immaterially –by allocating project-related or budgeted resources- as well as legitimation and support on all (decision-making) levels. It discloses the extent to which the executive board reviews the effectiveness of such incentive systems." The decision on incentives and mechanisms to foster sustainability lies in the institutions at first. Nevertheless the policy sector has its own responsibility.

In Germany, the States have the constitutional responsibility for universities. They obligate the universities to sign contracts of performance. Tax money is given on the basis of such obligations. As an encouragement governments should give additional financial support for sustainability processes and programs. If, e.g. an university by economising resources spends less money than the year before, this saved money should no longer be cut the next year but be spent for new investments in greater sustainability. Such incentives are desirable motors for sustainability, because even within universities and despite all idealistic motivations, you will need some tangible incentives to start and to accelerate the necessary run for utmost sustainability.

As you are all aware goal 4 of the SDGs mentions explicitly the important role education plays in forming a more sustainable world. The Global Action Program, set up by UNESCO last year, calls upon governments to engage in education for sustainable development in

all sectors and on all levels of education. For some years now the Federal Ministry of Education and Research tried to foster sustainability research by projects, e.g. „Learning in the local community", and „Future City". As I already mentioned a lot of interesting projects have been kick-started by active initiators within universities.

Referring to the ESD road map for activities the ministry developed a new strategy to promote sustainability in the German education sector. The guiding slogan, which rings also true for universities, is „From project to structure". The final content of this claim will be decided by a national platform of 37 high ranking officials representing the Federal government, the German states and the civil society, e.g. representatives of the unions, of the entrepreneurial associations, of the environmental associations, of the churches, of the education sectors and so on.

Associated to this national platform are six expert forums. Five of them are organised following the education biography: pre-school, school, vocational training, university, non-formal and informal learning/ adult learning. All these forums, included Forum University, refer to the action groups established during UNESCOs ESD-decade 2005-2014. Beyond this they should stay in contact to partnering networks outside the national platform.

In Forum Six, which is responsible for ESD on the local level, SDGs 4 and 11 (sustainable cities) associate. You may remember that the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development asks for five priority action areas to accelerate progress towards sustainable development:

- Advancing policy,
- Transforming learning and training environments,
- Building capacities of educators and trainers,
- Empowering and mobilizing youth,
- Accelerating sustainable solutions at local level.

The white paper the federal ministry issued, when starting the new action period for sustainability, mentions explicit problems to be solved in the Forum University:

- Where and how is it possible to integrate education for sustainable development (ESD) in the different forms of teaching?
- How will it be possible to teach ESD in an interdisciplinary way as long as universities are well structured in special divisions?
- How is it possible to anchor ESD in the institution as a whole?
- How is it possible to develop and implement indicators aiming at a sustainable development of universities?
- How is it possible to promote the networking between administration, students and professors?
- How is it possible to foster trans- and interdisciplinary research?

- Which frame conditions are necessary?
- Which research in the field of ESD is still necessary?
- How can ESD become part of the strategic agreement between universities and ministries?

I already mentioned that success in sustainability processes demands commitment at the top as well as commitment at the bottom. We are lucky, to see initiatives on both levels, take the 13 universities which are willing to participate in the test phase for an upcoming university codex for sustainability – by commitment of the presidents and the governing bodies. Take as well the rising number of student initiatives, asking for courses, lectures and case studies on sustainability in all disciplines; and lectures organised by the student body itself. Probably students will be the most motivated drivers of sustainability inside and outside institutions of higher education.

Two further developments are remarkable. Universities no longer represent isolated ivory towers in a hostile environment, but a part of a society, which aims for a sustainable future and viability. We experience a growing attitude that universities are not islands but parts of the educational landscape. By the way, universities will also play an important role in the world-wide spreading Global Network of Learning Cities. Within the academic sector the self-confidence and responsibility has apparently grown. New fields are open for discourse, and research on a sustainable future in respect for freedom of research and departmental and social interconnectivity.

The University Alliance for Sustainability is an encouraging example for our common future. I applaud your motivation as exemplary. Motivation is nothing but anticipation of success. I am convinced that in the future the ranking of universities worldwide will take increasingly take into consideration their vitality in sustainability matters. And this again depends on a vibrant interaction with all actors within and outside universities. We all together have to work hard that ESD becomes a matter of courses, even a truism. Solutions are not around the corner but first steps are already made. Let us now systematically study, research, practice and coordinate the activities for the future we want.

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