

SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EMERGING AND NECESSARY CHALLENGE

Sustainability has become one of the most relevant and urgent issues of our time, as reflected in the United Nations 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015, which establishes seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) designed to transform social, economic, and environmental dynamics, ensuring a more sustainable future.

In this context, higher education plays a crucial role. Universities, through their scientific, research, and innovation activities, provide the foundation for generating solutions and technologies aimed at addressing global problems that remain insufficiently addressed. These challenges include climate change, environmental and soil degradation, air pollution, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, and global warming, as well as their social consequences, such as poverty, economic crises, inequality, health problems, migration, gender issues, discrimination, inequity, and injustice. Moreover, the demands imposed by the technological revolution, including artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, and automation, also present challenges for both the labor market and societies in general.

As a result, universities are expected to assume a significant responsibility in promoting sustainability and achieving the SDGs. These institutions are in a position to influence public discourse, catalyze significant changes within communities, and prepare future professionals with the capacity to critically analyze the interrelationships between environmental, social, and economic aspects, ensuring that their decisions prioritize sustainable and socially responsible choices. Moreover, they must commit to integrating sustainability into their internal operations, including campus management and academic staff administration, grounding their actions in the principles of freedom, justice, peace, and solidarity.

Nevertheless, it is essential that these efforts be carried out without compromising the continuity of their educational projects, as a truly efficient university is one that, without sacrificing educational quality or academic excellence, also commits to sustainability and social responsibility, promoting equality and inclusion in every policy and action.

However, integrating sustainability into higher education presents significant challenges, as it goes beyond the mere incorporation of specific content. It requires a profound cultural shift in dominant educational practices and structures. This transformation demands the adoption of integrated, systemic approaches that connect actions across various areas, including curricula, syllabi, campus operations, research, and university communities.

Thus, for universities to act as catalysts for social change toward a more sustainable future, it is essential that sustainability be incorporated into their guiding principles and that the SDGs be fully integrated into their strategic planning. This implies that a truly sustainable university not only prepares citizens to be active participants in social issues but also promotes socially responsible values within its community, applies social responsibility criteria in its internal management, innovatively utilizes resources, and maintains active connections with its surroundings.

Finally, a sustainable university must promote a culture of sustainability, address resistance to change within its organizational structures, maintain a solid funding model to support its activities and long-term investments, encourage research projects that address both local and global challenges, and establish strategic alliances with governments, businesses, and civil society organizations. Additionally, it should implement control mechanisms to assess goal achievement and establish clear indicators to measure the impact of its sustainability initiatives, ensuring continuous and effective feedback.

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