

Abstract

Towards Sustainability Leadership at Higher Education Institutions – The Case of Munich University of Applied Sciences

Author: Lara Lütke-Spatz (Master of Studies in Sustainability Leadership, 2010- 2012, University of Cambridge, UK)
Research Assistant Sustainability Education
Munich University of Applied Sciences
Lothstraße 34
80335 Munich
Tel: +49 891265-1135
E-Mail: lara.luetke-spatz@hm.edu

Determinants of change, effective leadership, and sustainability behaviour, especially in a corporate setting, have been widely explored in literature. However, no single framework seems to suit the specific organisational structures and fields of activity (governance, curriculum, research, campus management and community engagement) of an academic setting. Building on existing models, we designed a conceptual framework applicable specifically to Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) for this research.

We address the following key research questions:

- How do contextual and human factors interact to provide a platform for action towards sustainability at Higher Education Institutions (HEI's).
- What are the key drivers and barriers of change towards a whole-systems approach to sustainability of HEI's?

We chose the Cambridge Sustainability Leadership Model (Visser and Courtice, 2011, [Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice](#)) as a broad structure for our conceptual framework, as it concentrates on gaining a better understanding of sustainability leadership and transformational change in practice. It acknowledges the interplay between individuals and their actions in a specific (corporate) context, and focuses on creating change towards sustainability. Our model also incorporates current insights into the specific issues that need to be addressed in order to facilitate a whole-system transformation towards sustainability at HEI's specifically (COPERNICUS Alliance, 2012, [People's Sustainability Treaty on Higher Education](#); Jones, P., Selby, D. and Sterling, S. (eds.) (2010), [Sustainability Education: Perspectives and Practice across Higher Education](#)).

In this case study on the Munich University of Applied Sciences (MUAS) we carried out 35 semi-structured interviews with members of the executive board and senior academic and administrative staff in 2011 and in 2012. We take a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis and follow the principles of thematic analysis. A coding manual for data analysis, which describes distinctions made between each code, is provided. Our conceptual framework forms the basic structure of analysis.

Our findings indicate that sustainability actions at the Munich University of Applied Sciences are dependent primarily on the following factors:

- external and internal context
- individual's understanding of sustainability
- individual's ascription of responsibility
- individual's propensity for change
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Regarding the individual level, all three aspects have to be significant in order to facilitate action towards sustainability. Although individual's understanding of sustainability at MUAS is rather high, individual's propensity for change was seen to be hampered by major structural changes, which were incurred by external impacts. Most senior executives show support for sustainability issues. However, individual's ascription of responsibility varies considerably. It is mainly due to the persistence of individual intrapreneurs - at all hierarchical levels - driving change towards sustainability.

Although sustainability still awaits its place as a core value of MUAS, sustainability actions at MUAS are visible. A perceived lack of sustainability vision and strategy at MUAS indicates, that a whole-systems approach to sustainability at MUAS still has to be tackled by firmly embedding sustainability in governance and decision-making processes.