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PROMOTING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN FINNISH HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030), agreed by the UN Member States, aims at sustainable development, taking equal account of the environment, the economy and the human being. The aim of Agenda 2030 is to ensure by 2030 that all learners receive the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development. It is also time for higher education to respond more strongly to this challenge and to bring sustainability into the activities of education, research and everyday practices in higher education institutions. Studies show that sustainable development is mainly mentioned in the general objectives of education, but in practical activities and teaching it is not more noticeable.

In Finland, higher education institutions, universities and universities of applied sciences, have both adopted their joint sustainable development and responsibility programme, which are based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. In this article, we will consider these approaches to sustainability, their similarities and differences, and present, on the basis of qualitative material, some examples of how higher education in Finland is practically progressing in the implementation of the alignments.

Higher education cannot be redesigned or renewed by developing only teaching and learning. Making real change also requires redesigning structures, processes and ways of action in higher education institutions. Strategic decision-making, management commitment and practical actions are needed in everyday life to promote a sustainable future. The commitment of higher education institutions to promote sustainability through their own programmes is a major step towards reforming higher education and a sustainable future. Examples of program implementation and good practices can increase discussion of the role of higher education and highlight collectively exploited ways to promote sustainable development.

Keywords: Sustainable development, higher education, education development, Finland, sustainability

1 INTRODUCTION

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Agenda 2030), agreed by the United Nations Member States, aims at sustainable development (SD), taking equal account of the environment, the economy and the human being [1]. The aim of Agenda 2030 is to ensure by 2030 that all learners receive the knowledge and skills necessary to promote sustainable development. It is also time for higher education (HE) to respond more strongly to this challenge and to bring sustainability into the activities of education, research and everyday practices in higher education institutions (HEIs). Studies show that sustainable development is mainly mentioned in the general objectives of higher education, but in practical activities and teaching it is not noticeable [2]. However, the situation is changing. For the past few years, more HEIs have focused their teaching and research on sustainability solutions, especially in their local communities. In order to promote such a concentration, transitional steps are needed in all activities: curricula, study content and pedagogy, campus management, research and community work [3].

In Finland, higher education institutions, universities [4] and universities of applied sciences [5], have both adopted their joint sustainable development and responsibility programmes, which are based on the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The programmes aim at meeting UN objectives, but different institutions are at different stages of their activities and are implementing them in various ways.

Universities of applied sciences offer professionally oriented higher education on bachelor's and master's level and have strong ties with working life and regional development. Universities focus on scientific research and the education they provide is based on it. Universities offer bachelor's, master's and doctoral (PhD) level programmes.

The activities of both higher education institutions are based on extensive autonomy and the freedom of science. According to legislation the higher education institution types have differences: the mission of the universities is to promote independent academic research as well as academic and artistic education, to provide research-based higher education and to educate students to serve their country and humanity at large [6]. The mission of UASs is to provide higher education for expert professional jobs based on the requirements of working life and its development and on the premises of academic research. They must also carry out applied research, development and innovation activities and artistic activities. UASs has duties to promote industry, business and regional development and regenerate the industrial structure of the region. [7]. As well universities and UASs promote strongly lifelong learning, interact with the surrounding society and promote the social impact of research findings and artistic activities.

In this article, we will consider these HE approaches to sustainability, their similarities and differences, and present, on the basis of qualitative material, some examples of how higher education in Finland is practically progressing in the implementation of the alignments.

2 METHODOLOGY

In data analysis, we apply a qualitative method in which we combine elements from comparison, content analysis and discourse analysis. In addition, participatory observation is utilized. Comparison is a key approach or method in all human sciences. The comparative approach focuses on identifying the characteristics of individual cases and proceeds on its basis to assimilations [8]. So, too, in this study. Content analysis, on the other hand, allows consideration of both ordinary and repetitive, and exceptional expressions, as well as the detection and analysis of themes linking the material [9]. In this study, content analysis has been used to analyze what is said in the various research data.

The data of the research consists of the programmes of sustainability and responsibility. The first one is published by the Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS) Arene and the second one by the Council of Rectors of the Universities of Finland (Unifi). The size of Arene's programme is 12 pages and the one of Unifi 22 pages.

The research material consists of documents such as sustainable development and responsibility programmes in Finnish higher education institutions, their HEI specific programmes and strategies, as well as HEIs' web pages communicating about their sustainable development activities and progress.

3 FEATURES OF SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSITY

The characteristics of sustainability higher education institution has been sketched during the last decades. The categorizations have been done both from the societal orientation and organisational facilities.

Beynaghi et al. (2016) suggest that the advancement of sustainability through societal collaboration and various functions such as education and research will increasingly constitute a core mission for universities. They frame possible future orientations through three unique scenarios called a socially, environmentally and economically oriented university. Pursuit of sustainable development through each of these would contribute unique and fundamental changes. These would have impact on all university actions, e.g. on university mission, focus areas, disciplines, education for sustainable development, external partners, projects and research activities, outputs with societal stakeholders, and geographical focus. [10]

Lozano et al. (2013) propose that for universities to become leaders and change drivers in sustainable development, they must ensure that the needs of present and future generations are better understood and considered in all actions: education, research, campus greening and stakeholder relation. This requires university staff having a deep understanding of SD so that can effectively educate students of all ages to help make the transition to sustainable societies and societal patterns. In order to do so, university management and staff must be empowered to redesign their thinking and implement new paradigms and ensure that SD is the 'Golden Thread' throughout the entire university system. [11]

Transition towards real sustainability needs actions; the strategy, mission and different SD programmes are not enough. For example, practices in which the HE sector carries out globally their

daily activities is an important demonstration how to reinforce the desired sustainable values and achieve environmentally responsible living standards, and finally moderate operation of the whole society [12], [13].

The coverage of SD activities seems to be a remarkable measurement of the maturation level of the university. As well the university's own, shared SD profile supports the in-house developing and improving process of different actors, informing also the partners and stakeholders about the priorities in SD.

4 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES IN FINNISH HIGHER EDUCATION

The Rectors' Conference of Finnish Universities of Applied Sciences Arene published its Programme of Sustainability and Responsibility for all universities of applied sciences (UAS) in late 2020. The common aim of the programme is to increase the handprint of UAS in the development of society and to reduce the footprint of their activities. The handprint refers to the impact of UAS actions in its education and research, development and innovation activities (RDI), which transform society and working life towards sustainability. The handprint is increased by HEI management, skilful personnel, competences provided by education as well as by impact of various RDI activities and research projects. The footprint causing emissions will be reduced so that all Finnish UAS will be carbon neutral by 2030. The programme describes the promises and actions of UAS to promote sustainability and responsibility. The programme is divided in parts of education, RDI activities and management and staff competence, presenting the handprint, and in carbon footprint, introducing the measures to cut down the carbon emissions. [5]

At the same time as Arene's programme, the Unifi Working Group of the Council of Rectors of the Universities of Finland also published its 12 Sustainable Development and Responsibility principles, or theses, common to all universities. The aim of these principles is to say how universities bear their social responsibilities: generate knowledge and research, educate competencies in different fields and actively act as social influencers. The principles list those key measures that universities intend to take without delay to promote sustainability and responsibility. These include bringing sustainability and responsibility topics to all studies, securing the biosphere, reducing carbon emissions, promoting equality and eliminating discrimination, as well as incorporating sustainability thinking into all activities from management systems to recruitment criteria and to evaluation of research projects. Each university can promote the principles for itself in the most natural order. [4]

Because sustainable development and responsibility programmes are rather fresh, their implementation is not fully covered yet. However, all universities and universities of applied sciences are progressing in their SD activities. Their web pages communicate about their sustainable development activities and progress in various ways, and the majority of HEIs have also included sustainability in their strategy and mission statements. The analysis of web pages describes HEIs' commitment to sustainable development and responsibility. The practical actions presented on web pages focus usually on research project promoting SD, measures on campuses in order to cut down HEI carbon emissions or stating how SD topics are integrated in studies offered by the specific HEI. Use as many sections/subsections as you need.

5 DISCUSSION

There are many similarities in Arene's and Unifi's programmes, but also differences. The legitimate duties of the two pillars of higher education differ as well as the policy steering mechanisms. These indicate also to the contents of SD manifestos. The UASs are more focusing to local and regional efficiency while the importance of international aspects are stronger in universities [13].

The UAS sustainability programme seems to focus more on climate issues, while university principles cover the different dimensions and perspectives of sustainable development. Of course, climate change and the carbon neutrality objective are a unifying and perhaps the most important goal of higher education in the work of sustainable development. Its importance is also illustrated by speeches made in the media by representatives of universities and universities of applied sciences, particularly focused on resolving the climate crisis.

Concerning UAS, it can be noted that the programme focuses in particular on ecological sustainability by relying on the development of basic activities of the UAS. However, by increasing the teaching of

sustainable development by a few study credits is still not enough to achieve sustainable development. Similarly, it is easy to add sustainability in research to the description of the research project, but the genuine realization of sustainability is harder to assess.

In universities, social sustainability has been raised alongside the ecological in the form of issues such as inequality and discrimination. But, as noted in the UAS, concrete measures are still running short. In both programmes, financial sustainability is not usually discussed in more detail, with the exception of a few beautiful-sounding phrases. Economic sustainability can be understood in various ways, from moderate growth thinking to sustainability gap, which is why it can be difficult to grasp.

It is still early to assess how Finnish higher education institutions will meet their sustainability goals and promises. It is excellent that work has been started, and that higher education institutions share the common concern and challenge of building a sustainable future. The sustainable development and responsibility programmes are an excellent start to work, but it must be remembered that there is a need for continuous discussion and reflexion and action to be developed. HEIs can ask themselves whether they are doing their best to tackle the sustainability crisis, or whether they are content to shape their basic tasks towards a more sustainable direction. It is also necessary to consider the kind of sustainable development that the HEIs are seeking to promote. Both programmes mention that they are based on the UN Agenda 2030 on Sustainable Development. Agenda 2030 has received plenty of criticism for its anthropocentric, or human-centric, approach to sustainability [14]. Sustainable development is about acting within the limits of the Earth's carrying capacity and preserving the entire planet for future generations. Agenda 2030 speaks about human generations, but sustainable development should also be considered from the point of view of nature and all living beings necessary for ecosystems.

Sustainable development and responsibility programmes need to be continually reformed in an increasingly holistic and ethical direction. To have a real impact all HEI activities and operations need to be covered to ensure that SD is the 'Golden Thread' throughout the entire organization. The work of Finnish HEIs to promote sustainable development and responsibility is not irrelevant but has the opportunity to show direction for the whole European education policy. Based on the enthusiastic welcome of the programmes among the Finnish HEIs, and the progress of HEIs to implement the programmes, the HEIs' staff have the will and motivation to meet the challenge. According to the survey conducted in early 2021 among UAS staff, education is seen as the most effective tool in promoting sustainable development. By ensuring that all the students get the knowledge, skills and motivation to foster sustainable development can best increase the SD impact of HEIs in societies.

Higher education cannot be redesigned or renewed by developing only teaching and learning. Making real change also requires redesigning structures, processes and ways of action in higher education institutions. [15] Strategic decision-making, management commitment and practical actions are needed in everyday life to promote a sustainable future [16]. HEI staff plays a crucial role when redesigning education towards sustainability. If especially teachers and lectures do not commit to, or resist the reforms, the reform tends to fail. The teaching staff needs support and further training when education is aimed at leading towards the desired direction [17], [18]. As always with change processes, the reform needs to be led so that participants themselves perceive the need for change, and thus a will to do things differently, in a new way. The systemic nature of sustainability issues requires deep understanding of hierarchy of SD topics and interdependencies. This usually requires time and plenty of discussion, as well as inclusion. [3]

The commitment of higher education institutions to promote sustainability through their own programmes is a major step towards reforming higher education to foster a sustainable future. Examples of programme implementation and good practices can increase discussion of the role of higher education and highlight collectively exploited ways to promote sustainable development.

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