

HIGHER EDUCATION: INTERVIEW WITH DR MANDY SINGER-BRODOWSKI



What is the area of higher education doing to anchor Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)?

Institutions of higher education have a long tradition in increasing disciplinary differentiation and academic freedom. This holds both challenges and chances for the inter- and transdisciplinary concept of ESD. On the one hand, this academic autonomy is the fundament for a critically distanced observation and evaluation of societal developments and is thus, importantly, constitutionally protected. On the other

hand, academia follows its own specific logic: it is organized in more and more strictly specialized specialist communities in which academics assess their work and findings mutually and in this way advance the development of their own field of research. While this ensures the quality of academic products and findings, the drawback is that external expectations of academia, e.g. to advocate for more sustainability, tend to have less significance due to this specific organizational form. Against this backdrop, the anchoring of sustainability and ESD in higher education is developing as a process with diverse tensions. In spite of these tensions, it has great potential for restructuring responsible universities that are embedded in their respective societal surrounding.

The ESD monitoring has analysed a variety of documents and has surveyed students. What are the main findings for higher education?

The monitoring findings for the documents related to higher education indicate the growing inclusion of sustainability and sustainable development (in rare cases of ESD as well) in the steering instruments for academic policies enacted by the state ministries. These include higher education acts, target and performance agreements and university development plans. This is much less so in the documents that are representative for the self-regulation of the universities, such as in decrees of the state and federal rector conferences, module descriptions of selected degree programmes or the

RECENT UPDATES FROM THE GERMAN ESD-MONITORING (LINK)

Holst, J., Brock, A., Singer-Brodowski, M., & de Haan, G. (2020). **Monitoring Progress of Change: Implementation of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) within Documents of the German Education System.**

Grund, J., & Brock, A. (2020). **Education for Sustainable Development in Germany: Not Just Desired but Also Effective for Transformative Action.**

Singer-Brodowski, M., von Seggern, J., Duveneck, A., & Etzkorn, N. (2020). **Moving (Reflexively within) Structures. The Governance of Education for Sustainable Development in Germany.**

internationalization strategies of the institutions. In the course of a student survey, it was furthermore shown that the interest of young people in sustainability is becoming more and more ambitious. That being said, 51% of the students said that sustainability has not been particularly visible at their universities up to now.

In the course of the monitoring, interviews were also conducted with experts. What main insights could be gained for the implementation of ESD at universities?

A central strategy of transformation used by certain universities is building a profile based on ESD, as in the case of the Leuphana University Lüneburg or the Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development. Since sustainability is becoming an increasingly important profile issue for universities, this strategy is promising for other institutions as well.

„Sustainability is a basic prerequisite for the long-lasting freedom of academia. It is only in mostly peaceful and democratic societies that academic independence is valued and can flourish.“

It is particularly worth noting strategies that follow the ‘whole institution approach’, i.e. they integrate sustainability as a basis for everything that happens throughout the university. Indeed, international experience shows that activities related to the sustainability of an institution are often initialized by greening the campus and then transfer to research and instruction. However – and this is shown by the findings of the ESD monitoring as well – while sustainability is being moved to the forefront in research, the didactic potential of higher education for sustainable development has hardly been realized by experts in the area. Sustainability cannot remain an issue related to image for selected institutions: it is a basic prerequisite for the long-lasting freedom of academia. It is only in mostly peaceful and democratic societies that academic independence is valued and can flourish.

What do these findings mean for the actors who would like to advocate for the strengthening of ESD?

At the moment, the central path of transformation in higher education has so far consisted in certain organizations fostering their sustainability orientation by means of polishing their image. Yet by taking this path actors are confronted with a considerable challenge: instead of comprehensive political management (as in the area of school with the introduction of curricula), the strategy is to network the self-regulated sustainability activities of the different universities in the areas of research, instruction, governance, transfer and reporting, and in doing so to professionalize them. This approach was carried out in the Hoch-N project that, in the meantime, is in a phase of transformation itself. Political initiatives related to institutions of higher education and science, such as the increased inclusion of sustainability in higher education acts, target and performance agreements and at the state and federal level could give important impulses and could therefore be prioritized. The didactic training of lecturers is a crucial field of action here because the didactic potential of ESD has not yet been seized upon for engaged instruction in higher education (e.g. research or project-oriented learning).

Contact

Dr. Mandy Singer-Brodowski

E-Mail: [s-brodowski\(at\)institutfutur.de](mailto:s-brodowski@institutfutur.de)

URL: www.institutfutur.de

