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Implementing Innovation on Environmental Sustainability at Universities Around the World

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Abstract: Innovation is known to be an important and influential factor in fostering sustainable development. Yet, there is a paucity of literature on the extent to which universities are successfully implementing innovation in this field. This paper addresses this gap, by examining the role of innovation in the field of environmental sustainability in universities, and by reporting on the results of an international study, in which examples of successful experiences and good practice were identified. The paper outlines the lessons learned from such examples, with the aim of motivating other universities to engage in this rapidly-growing field.

Keywords: innovation change; experiences; good practice; innovation for sustainable development; higher education
1. Introduction

To achieve sustainability, innovation needs to be applied to emerging challenges. Innovation is commonly defined as “the implementation of a new or significantly improved product (good or service), or process, a new marketing method, or a new organisational method in business practices workplace organization or external relations.” [1]. Additionally, sustainable innovation reflects innovation that “balances the long-term influences of the process and the output with the needs of people, societies, the economy and the environment” [2].

Innovations can not only change societal behaviours and environments, but also ensure that organisations, institutions, communities and society as a whole can become more sustainable [3]. According to Dormann and Holliday [4] in a report for the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, innovation is fundamental for creating a sustainable human society and not focusing merely on more efficient approaches. Thus, radical and systemic innovations to products, services, and business models are needed [5,6].

Over the last decade, sustainability and the importance of sustainable development has been increasingly acknowledged by academics, policy-makers and industry [e.g 7,8]. This is due, in part, to current global environmental challenges, such as increasing extreme weather events [9], food and water shortages [10], degradation of ecosystems and biodiversity [11], and a widening gap between the rich and poor [12]. These global challenges were also discussed in the Global Environment Outlook GEO-6 [13], which highlights the importance of innovation for transformative change.

UNESCO initiatives [14], the Halifax Declaration [15], the Talloires Declaration [16], and Europe’s independent COPERNICUS-CAMPUS [17] are examples of schemes that have shown that higher education institutions (HEIs) have become conscious of their sustainability practices and performance among faculty, students, and the community. Many international strategies, declarations and university commitments offer support to the implementation of sustainability in HEIs [18], but despite several political initiatives and the important role played by higher education for sustainable development, education for sustainable development is not yet very well widespread [19]. A call for greater collaboration in HEIs is thus necessary. Faculty and administrators, together with environmental practitioners, could develop interdisciplinary approaches to curricula, research initiatives, operations, and outreach activities that support an environmentally sustainable future [16].

In order to yield the expected benefits, sustainability in higher education requires whole-university approaches [20-22]. Yet its incorporation into HEI practices is often fragmented. More often than not, sustainability finds itself positioned in discipline-based sustainable development courses. Such initiatives are often not multidisciplinary nor transdisciplinary [23] and do not consider sustainable development in institutional policy [20] which could enhance innovation. The education taking place in HEIs is often not yet seen as a catalyst for innovation and social change aiming to create a sustainable society [24]. Yet, HEIs need to include education for sustainable development into broader activities so that they may pursue sustainability and create opportunities for innovation [25]. Innovations taking place at HEIs include emphasising the idea of campus well-being where activities that promote sustainability feature inter- and transdisciplinary approaches [22]. The freedom to design innovative transdisciplinary sustainable development-oriented content in HEIs is limited by elements such as accreditation procedures, institutional conditions that include disciplinary structure, the dependence on specific a few experts, and the financing of courses that mostly considers student interest (and attendance) in some disciplines [20].

Sustainability practices can be incorporated into the formal HEI curricula by offering students the opportunity to become leaders for change through the experience of contributing to change, also known as a curriculum and operational innovation [26]. Coursework that requires students to integrate knowledge across the boundaries of disciplines can lead to higher levels of transdisciplinarity and competence development. Initiatives which require students to integrate knowledge across the boundaries of disciplines may include provisions for initiatives within the organisation (e.g. on energy conservation, waste prevention or emissions reductions). Combined, these may feed into the whole institutional approach.
The promotion of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) has been taking place due to critical transition factors beginning with the acceptance of environmental principles, sustainable development perspectives through individual initiatives that policy-makers are aware of, new transdisciplinary programs, networking, and whole-institution approaches that include practical green campus initiatives. Transdisciplinary initiatives, changes in teaching and learning processes and innovation in the content of university curricula may then occur [20].

HEIs are often fragmented in their efforts, with little sign of holistic implementation [27] despite the call by UNESCO to move towards whole-university approaches. The shift needed is in organisational culture, including developments in sustainability practices in teaching and learning, research, community engagement [20,22,28] and campus management. Leadership is fundamental to the integration of sustainability in HEIs maintaining consistency, collaboration and systemic approaches to management [29]. However, university management may not appreciate the importance of innovation and sustainability with regard to addressing social and economic inequalities throughout the university [30]. Many universities work towards securing funding that allows for research outputs and they may not take the social and environmental aspects of sustainability into consideration [20]. The latter issue, is the focus of this paper.

The engagement of all members of the university, especially – but not only - senior administration is crucial in order to ensure top-down and bottom – up support [22,30]. Those managers with a sustainability vision need to also allow innovation to emerge bottom-up. Communication between stakeholders both on and off campus is essential to the success of HEI sustainability initiatives. HEIs that showcase innovative examples of sustainability stimulate innovative potential and become a testing field for change. HEIs should move toward collaborative development of knowledge and initiate dialogue in their respective communities. This collaboration will project the HEI’s vision and put forward its ethical position. HEIs can then become an example of sustainability in society [22]. Adjustments to academic priorities, organisational structures, financial and audit systems, advanced strategic integration, staff development, collaborative partnerships and dialogue amongst stakeholders are required for HEIs to become learning organisations that progress sustainability [31]. And that do justice to the environmental potential of sustainability practices.

Strategies to advance innovation in sustainability in HEIs as a whole, and on environmental sustainability in particular, have many obstacles and challenges. Some of the main barriers to innovation and sustainability at HEIs are associated with management [30]. Other barriers have been identified as: resistance to change; lack of support from institutional administrators [32]; lack of specific working groups, committees and sustainability offices; cultural and behavioural change; lack of financial resources; lack of engagement between municipalities, companies and universities; lack of reporting and accountability mechanisms; and institutional culture [30].

Having other authors focused on eco-social innovation connected to sustainability in higher education and explored how to apply these new forms of learning [33], this paper is interested in examining the role of innovation in the field of environmental sustainability and reports on the results of an international study, in the context of which examples of successful experiences and good practice are identified. The paper outlines the lessons learned from such examples, with the aim of motivating other universities to engage in this rapidly-growing field.

2. State of the art: Innovation and Sustainability at Universities today

Innovation in sustainability must be grounded in research and knowledge generation. Consequently, universities have a role to play in finding solutions to sustainability problems [34].
While universities might be aware of how research can contribute to sustainable innovation, the role of the student population in finding social, economic, legislative, and technological innovations to help address what are sometimes known as contemporary ‘wicked problems’, is less understood [2].

Innovation in sustainability on campuses can be in respect of operations, education, and/or (the impact of) research. Verhoef and Bossert [35] state that “For many university operations departments,
changing to sustainability and/or circularity principles is (very) new and requires (big) changes.”. The authors highlight that this process may take some time and require innovative efforts, such as the use of ambitious standards for buildings in order to contribute to CO2 reduction targets and circular systems, for example.

Living Labs, another approach to innovation, are well suited for ‘wicked’ multi-stakeholder problems or solutions. They build on three corner stones: learning integral element in the projects, involvement of users, and innovation as a goal. A systematic organisational and management approach to urban Living Labs was recently published by Steen and van Bueren [36] and for household-related Living Labs by Keyson et al. [37]. At a university campus, the unique possibility exists to have researchers deploy their findings on their own premises, and for students to be both experimenters and users of the services provided, thus enriching their learning. Combining research, education and campus operations in the form of Living Labs has been discussed in various international sustainable university workshops (e.g. ISCN, 2017, HSDS, 2017). Approaches employing Living Labs at universities are also emerging, leading to frameworks for Living Labs for sustainability on campuses [38] and successful examples, amongst others at Delft University of Technology [39], at the Eidgenössische Technische Hochschule Zürich [40] and at the European School of Sustainability Science and Research (ESSSR) in Hamburg. A recent book produced by a team led by ESSSR also handles this topic [41] and explores the connection with the Sustainable Development Goals. ESSSR pay a special emphasis to innovation and Figure 1 explores the various innovation dimensions of its works.

Universities have a responsibility to not only drive innovation, but also role model the use of innovative technologies that promote sustainability as a whole, and environmental sustainability in particular. Their role as education institutions allows universities to teach students about the importance of sustainability [42,43] and modern and socially relevant themes such as climate change mitigation tools and techniques [44], while providing opportunities for students to explore innovative solutions to environmental degradation [45]. Thus, by making use of sustainable innovations, universities can potentially instil values that are grounded in environmental sustainability at local, national and international levels [46]. Given many decision makers in

![Figure 1 - Innovation dimensions of ESSSR’s works](image)
communities, organisations and politics are university graduates this is significant and can have flow-on effects for sustainability as students graduate and work across sectors [47].

Finally, many universities also own large estates where the potential for environmental improvements are significant. The potential alone for carbon savings is significant, estimated at 0.7 Gton/yr equivalent to approx. 1.5% of global CO2 emissions in a recent publication [35,48]. In addition, innovative solutions implemented by one university and then shared with the sector might have the potential to contribute to carbon savings and other positive impacts on social, environmental and economic sustainability. The Green Gown Awards in the UK are such an example. They started in the UK in 2004 and moved to Europe in 2006 and Australasia in 2010. They involve universities competing for awards linking campus and curriculum innovations and through the award process, they promote examples of good sustainable practices [49].

3. Methodology: a survey of Innovation and Sustainability at Universities

3.1. Survey design

In order to address the research question: “to which extent are universities using innovation as a tool to implement sustainability?” and fill in the research gap on specific information about the implementation of innovation and sustainability at universities around the world, a questionnaire was undertaken. The aim of the survey was to understand whether and how universities innovate with regards to environmental issues. This was based on the assumption and definition given above that innovation in relation to sustainable development is strongly linked to improved products, processes and services. When it comes to the context of universities, the focus of our study, the survey aimed to portray the opinions and realities at different institutions with regard to their outlook of innovation and sustainability in addition to associated attitudes, practices and beliefs. The first list of items was reviewed by the authors to minimize redundancies and similar items and to ensure that all important questions were added. The questionnaire survey was pre-tested by a panel of academics within sustainability areas at different universities, as already performed by other studies [50]. The survey instrument was composed of 20 questions (fifteen closed questions and five open questions) and structured in a way that it could gather information on the universities’ experiences. Table 1 presents the topics and issues covered in the questionnaire.

Table 1. Summary of the topics and issues covered by the questionnaire survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assessed issues</th>
<th>Options</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General</td>
<td>Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondent and university</td>
<td>Country, Region, Role</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University’s participation in awareness-raising activities</td>
<td>My university participates in awareness-raising activities and assists with distributing information and advice.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Environmental sustainability team and Environmental sustainability policy</td>
<td>My university has an environmental sustainability team who raise awareness of environmental sustainability across the organisation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability</td>
<td>Importance given to programme development to achieve the commitments of its environmental sustainability policy and plan</td>
<td>My university participates in program development and in implementing ideas to achieve the commitments of its environmental sustainability policy and plan.</td>
<td>Strongly disagree, Disagree, Don’t know, Agree, Strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Actions planned to demonstrate the commitment to reduce the university’s environmental footprint and</td>
<td>My university has planned its actions for the next three years to demonstrate its commitment to reducing the university’s environmental footprint and seeking to continually improve its environmental performance.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Promotion of waste, energy and water management and the benefits of active travel

My university promotes improved waste, energy and water management and the benefits of active travel.

Carbon reduction targets at the university

My university contributes in its operation to achieve the carbon reduction targets set by the government.

Education of students about the impact of climate change

My university educates its students about the impact of climate change on the discipline chosen by the student.

What scale is the scope of your current or last project/programme?

university-wide, faculty, department, support services, other

What objectives were involved in this project?

new buildings, renovations, mobility, services, other

What kind of innovation was implemented?

Technological, organisational, educational, financial, other

How did you manage / organise innovation?

living lab tools, TRL’s, R&D management, adoption theories, other

Which standards were used to come to new / better performance?

BREEM, WELL, ISO14000, in house standard, other

Description of the most successful project/program on innovation and sustainability, their nature, innovative aspects, benefits, challenges/problems and publication of results.

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3.2. Sampling

The survey was disseminated via a web link through email to the following groups, based on Leal Filho et al. [50]: rectors and office managers of a wide range of universities, including those which participated in the Green Sustainability Metrics 2016; authors of publications on the subject “sustainability at universities” in the Web of Science between 2007–2016; participants in the World Symposium on Sustainable Development at Universities, held in September 2016 at the Massachusetts Institute Technology in the United States of America; Rectors of Brazilian federal public universities; Rectors of Portuguese public universities; Representative of Universities (rektor, sustainability office manager, researcher/teacher) participating in the Inter-University Program for Sustainable Development Research (IUSDRP); Representatives of the Universities participating in the Copernicus Alliance; Rectors and Managers of the Sustainability Office of the Universities participating in the Association, for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AACHE). Approximately 1,000 persons were contacted, in 40 countries (distributed approximately as follows: 40% of them in Europe, 30% in Asia/Oceania, 15% in Africa, 10% in South America and 5% in North America). Responses were obtained from 73 universities in 17 countries, spread among all continents. The validity of the data is assured since it derived from bona fide academic institutions and supplied by well-informed sources. The reliability of data is also assured, since those who reply are very familiar with the concept of sustainability and have an understanding of the
emphasis to this topic in their own institutions. The same data can be verified in a few years’ time, which is also a characteristic of valid studies.

There are two main limitations with this approach: firstly, the answers derive from people who are motivated and knowledgeable enough to reply, so many others were not included. Secondly, only 17 countries took part and the spread of the responses does not allow conclusions to be drawn about the implications of the work to different geographical regions. On the other hand, a study on innovation on matters related to sustainable development in 17 countries is so far unparalleled in the literature, hence adding a degree of innovation and new insights into this key topic.

3.3. Data analysis

A total of 73 responses were received and analysed. The numerical data collected were analysed using SPSS 23® in order to perform descriptive statistics. The five open ended questions were analysed through content analysis [51], allowing (i) development of a classification of the answers in unit categories, and (ii) integration of categories and their meaning, to provide data interpretations.

4. Results and discussion

Most of the questionnaire’s respondents were from European universities (47%). North American, South American, African and Asian universities were represented by 10 to 16% of the respondents and Australasian were only 1%. Figure 2 shows the countries represented on the study.

![Figure 2- Countries represented on the study](image)

The respondents were mostly lecturers (37%) and researchers (26%), a few were sustainability officers (16%), and minor proportion was of operation managers (3%), university board members (3%) and procurement officers (1%). A minor number of students (4%) also responded the questionnaire, as well as “other respondents” (10%).

4.1. Sustainability
4.1.1. University involvement

Seeking information relating to university involvement towards sustainability and innovation, we asked whether the university promotes awareness-raising activities and assists with distributing information and advice. The majority of respondents (79%) strongly agree or agree with this statement, which may contribute to the innovation and sustainability at the universities, which may happen through varied approaches, including the use of social media [52] and research and teaching in inter- and transdisciplinary approaches [53]. Figure 3 presents all answers for this question.

![Figure 3. Comparison between university responses in relation to promotion of awareness-raising activities (percentage of respondents, N = 73)](image)

One next step to raise awareness of environmental sustainability across the organization is to have an environmental sustainability team. 73% of respondents strongly agree or agree that their university has such a team, contributing to the university involvement. Figure 4 presents all answers for this question. One example of innovative approach related to sustainability team is the Green Office Model [54] which empowers not only staff, but also students and academics.

![Figure 4. Comparison between university responses in relation to environmental sustainability team (percentage of respondents, N = 73)](image)
Communication is an important part of university involvement for innovation and sustainability. The inclusion of such topics in the environmental sustainability policy drives the strategy, which roots sustainability in the core of the university. In this matter, 75% of the respondents strongly agree or agree that the university has an environmental sustainability policy, while 72% strongly agree or agree that the university participates in program development and in implementing ideas to achieve the commitments of its environmental sustainability policy and plan. These two questions refer to communication of environmental sustainability and innovation, and Figure 5 shows their outcome. It is important to highlight, however, that these policies cannot be totally regarded as preconditions for universities to engage on sustainability issues [55], but they may support the process of management of resources and support innovation.

![Figure 5. Comparison between university responses in relation to environmental Sustainability Policy (percentage of respondents, N = 73)](image)

4.1.2. Operations

Working for environmental sustainability is commonly related to the operations on campus. In this sense, three questions were proposed in order to identify how the university is working with campus operations for sustainability. 69% of responses (strongly agree or agree) indicate that the university promotes improved waste, energy and water management and the benefits of active travel; 61% of all responses (strongly agree or agree) informed that the university contributes in its operation to achieve the carbon reduction targets set by the government. These results show that the universities are aware of the importance of investing in campus operations in the short term and reinforce the attention paid by many universities especially in issues related to energy, waste, water and climate action [56,57]. In the longer term, 53% of responses (strongly agree or agree) indicated that the university has planned its actions for the next three years to demonstrate its commitment to reducing the university’s environmental footprint and seeking to continually improve its environmental performance. Even though this last result is lower than the first two, it still shows a good direction in favour of sustainability. All results of these questions are shown in Figure 6.
Figure 6. Comparison between universities responses in relation to campus operations (percentage of respondents, N = 73)

4.1.3. Student involvement

As the university promotes sustainability through internal communication and campus operations, students want to be involved and participate in sustainability practices, which highlights the importance of the campus as a living laboratory [38]. In order to verify this topic, the respondents were asked if the university educates its students about the impact of climate change on the discipline chosen by the student. Although 61% answered they strongly agree or agree with this question, still 22% disagree with it. It shows that the student involvement is lacking attention regarding environmental sustainability. Figure 7 presents these results.

Figure 7. Comparison between universities responses in relation to student’s involvement (percentage of respondents, N = 73)

4.2. Innovation

The development of projects and/or programmes with specific sustainability aims and outcomes represents a way to influence the university, their students and operations towards sustainability and innovation.

Regarding the current or last project/programme in which the respondents were involved, most of these were implemented at the university-wide level (45%) and faculty level (10%), while fewer were at the departmental and support services’ level (16% and 12%, respectively). Still, nearly one-fifth of the respondents (17%) were involved in projects/programmes identified as “other” level, mainly involving links to society (local administration, private sector, community and social
networks outside the university campuses). This is in line with the key points presented by Müller-Christ et al. [22], regarding the importance of universities having society-wide dialogue with other key players and think beyond their physical boundaries to provide transferable models for the surrounding community.

The main issues involved in these projects/programmes were services and new buildings (31% and 18%, respectively), while renovations of existing buildings and mobility issues accounted for a lesser importance (9% and 6%, respectively). The greatest proportion of objectives in these projects/programmes (37%) was identified as “other”. These innovations were mostly of an educational (34%), technological (29%) and organisational nature (19%). Some of the implemented innovations were also identified as financial (4%) and of “other” categories (13%).

Specifically, the innovative aspects which were implemented via these projects / programmes were identified as living lab tools (13%), adoption of theory (18%), research and development management (15%) and technology readiness levels (TRL’s) (2%). However, most of the innovative aspects were not identified through the questionnaire (53%), which suggests that innovation can be practiced, but may not be perceived as such.

Standards used in the projects/programmes to attain new or better performances and promote innovation were mainly “in house standards” (35%) and ISO 14000 (18%); BREEAM and WELL standards were also identified in fewer cases (8% and 3%, respectively). In most cases, however, the project/programme standards were identified as “Other” by the respondents (43%).

Descriptions of the most successful innovation and sustainability project/program that respondents were currently implementing (open-ended questions), enabled a more in-depth understanding of these projects, their nature, and their innovative aspects.

Educational projects were subdivided into formal education at university (18%, mainly relating to curriculum) and informal education, i.e. sustainability awareness and community participation projects (13% and 6%, respectively). This latter category appeared with a strong emphasis, on projects involving local schools, museums, tourism organisations, local administration or business/private sector (on issues such as Waste, Energy, Water, Resources, Low Carbon, Transport and Mobility).

Also, projects within the categories Research and Development and Environmental Management Research (mostly related to Waste, Energy resources and Low Carbon, but also to a lesser extent related to Food Waste, Water and Risk) were identified as the most successful ones (10% and 13% of the respondents, respectively).

Projects on Financial innovation were related to dedicated funds such as “Green revolving” and “Energy saving”, or to “Sustainable finance and ESG information”. It was also noticeable that the Organisational and Technological Programmes mentioned were mostly complex and transversal to various sustainability aspects of the university campuses, such as waste (e.g. “implementation of institutional and standardised waste reduction strategies, covering technological, behavioural and organisational issues”), water (e.g. “WaterHub that purifies over 40% of the university waste water”), energy (e.g. Energy neutral buildings), low carbon (e.g. low to zero carbon emissions), infrastructures (e.g. Green buildings) transport, research and development (R&D) and education (formal and informal). Some of these sustainability aspects were certified by a variety of standards.

On one organisational programme, the aim was the development of collaborative communities in the university management: “a collaborative management system for the university should allow transversal issues as innovation, sustainability, equity, inclusion or so to be developed and implemented easier in the whole university” (…); “this is focusing at the (invisible) core of a sustainable organisation.” An overview of the main projects related to innovation are in Figure 8.
Figure 8. Overview of innovation projects based on universities responses

When asked which benefits were obtained from these most successful project/programme, the most evident dimensions reported were, again, increased awareness on environmental and sustainability issues (18%) and training on environmental and sustainability issues (13%), which endorses the answers obtained in relation to university and student’s involvement [42,43]. The importance of societal networking and of community engagement (external and internal to campus, with governance issues included) were also pointed as major benefits (17% and 6%, respectively). Innovative research on sustainability topics and natural resources conservation, low carbon emissions, and waste reduction were informed as project benefits by, respectively, 11%, 5% and 4% of the respondents. Although the respondents indicated previously that universities promote waste, energy and water management (72%), innovation is still not so strongly applied in practice. Financial benefits were identified, such as operational cost reduction and institutional marketing and student enrolment (11%). Social benefits of the involved communities (e.g. charities, NGOs) were reported by a few respondents (4%), which may indicate the potential for contributing to sustainability at local, national and international levels [46] is not being sufficiently realised.

Most problems found in the implementation of these successful projects were of motivational nature (37%; mainly due to cultural differences, participation on a voluntary basis, and time constraints of individuals, either for students, university staff or other partners) and of financial (30%) and governance and organisational nature (20%; mainly due to communication between organs and decision instances, as well as other staff at faculty or department; and also bureaucratic procedure hinders), aligned with the findings presented by Ávila et al. [30]. These challenges are to a greater or lesser extent connected to barriers to organisational change towards sustainable development in higher education, which include lack of explicit funding flows between organisations [58] and departmentalism, conservative management, stakeholders’ involvement and lack of interdisciplinary [59]. Technological and R&D limitations were reported by a minority (7%) and also a minority reported no limitations in the implementation of their projects (7%).

Finally, 69% of the respondents stated that they have published their project results in peer reviewed scientific journals, but 31% did not do so (some expressing that their project had just started). This suggests that projects related to sustainability and innovation are mainly focused on research for publication, and not necessary only related to benefits to the university. In this way, more support for research in sustainability and innovation could bring higher benefits for the university without it having to have a specific organisation (i.e. a centre) to act in these fields.
5. Conclusions

This paper has analysed some examples of how innovation in a sustainable development context is being practiced in a group of universities from different countries, in addition to presenting some factors that tend to contribute to the relation between innovation and sustainability in HEIs.

The innovative nature of this study lies on the fact that it tried to relate perceptions on the role of innovation as it related to sustainable development, with the ways sustainability is practiced. One limitation of the study is that it refers to responses obtained from a set of 73 universities and, as such, it cannot be regarded as comprehensive. However, bearing in mind that the sample encompassed higher education institutions from European universities, North America, South America, Africa and Asia/Australasia, it enables a profile to be built, of the extent to which innovation and sustainability are perceived across the sample.

The study presented a diversity of innovation projects in connection to institutional attitudes, practices and beliefs. This explains, for instance, why many universities have systematically designed and implemented sustainability policies, whereas others do not. Also, innovative aspects implemented by means of specific projects / programmes take place by means of living lab tools (e.g. green offices demonstrating sustainability in practice), the adoption of theories such as organisational programme identified in one of the surveyed universities, whose aim was the development of collaborative communities in the university management, by means of research (including research on sustainability innovation per se) or by deploying project management technology readiness levels (TRL’s) as the European School of Sustainability Science and Research -which led the research-does.

The study has a limitation in the sense that the answers derive only from people who are motivated and knowledgeable enough to reply. Also, with 17 countries only, it does not allow definitive conclusions about the implications of the work to different geographical regions. On the other hand, the sample is robust enough to allow a profile to be built, on the extent to which innovation on matters related to sustainable development are perceived and being pursued, providing new insights into this key topic.

The implications of this paper are two-fold. Firstly, it shows that in order to become more conspicuous, innovation should be more often applied with a view to handling sustainability challenges. This means going over and above and tackling issues related to motivational, financial and organisational nature. In this sense, more beneficial outcomes can be reached, as increased awareness on environmental and sustainability issues, which may be led to actual changes in attitudes and behaviours.

Secondly, innovation needs to be perceived as creating value for stakeholders, so that they may become more aware of its potential. It has become clear from the study, that the potential for improvements is significant and that universities should endeavour to take greater advantage of innovation not only with a view to pursuing sustainability objectives, but to also ensure that their surrounding communities and society can become more sustainable. Here, systemic innovation can play an important role.


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