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Conceptualizations of sustainability in Portuguese higher education: roles, barriers and challenges toward sustainability.

Ana Marta Aleixo (Ph.D. Candidate)
University Aberta

Susana Leal (Ph.D.)
Polytechnic Institute of Santarém

Ulisses Miranda Azeiteiro (Ph.D.)
University of Aveiro

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1. Introduction

PROBLEM

Although sustainability in HEI has been studied for over twenty years, relatively little is known about the status of its implementation in the Portuguese HEIs.

Few studies have investigated higher education for sustainable development (HESD) in Portugal and none have addressed how sustainability is interpreted and implemented in Portuguese HEIs, the role of HESD, and the related challenges and obstacles they face.

1. Introduction

OBJETIVES

- (a) to analyze how stakeholders of Portuguese HEIs understand the concepts of sustainability and SHEIs,
- (b) to understand the role played by Portuguese HEIs in fostering sustainability,
- (c) to identify the challenges and barriers to adopting a sustainability focused approach in Portuguese HEIs, and
- (d) to identify the main obstacles blocking sustainability initiatives in Portuguese HEIs.

2. Methods

This exploratory study follows a qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2012).

It follows Wright's research line (e.g., Wright and Wilton, 2012) and replicates their research questions (adapted for the Portuguese context).

Sample: Were interviewed five stakeholders (one leader, one faculty, one staff member, one student, and one external stakeholder) from 4 institutions, involving a total of **20 individuals**.

2. Methods

Table: Interview questions applied in this study

- | |
|---|
| 1. When you hear the term sustainable development, what does this mean to you? |
| 2. When you hear the term “sustainable University” or “sustainable Polytechnic institute” what does this mean to you? |
| 3. For you, what role, if any, do you feel universities and polytechnic institutes in general should play in achieving sustainability? |
| 4. Do you foresee different challenges in the future for sustainable development? |
| 5. Do you foresee different barriers in the future for sustainable development? |
| 6. What, if any, are the barriers that can prevent your Institution from engaging in sustainable initiatives? |
| 7. In your opinion, what are the key issues facing this Institution over the next ten years? |

Note: Adapted from Wright and Worst (2013), Wright and Wilton (2012) and Wright (2010).

3. Results

Sustainability Concept

In Portugal, there is a better understanding of sustainability nowadays, which might be explained by frequent references to it in the media and the fact that it has become a fashionable concept.

SHEI Concept

As results from others countries, the general perception is that there are no SHEIs in Portugal.

Role of Higher Education for Sustainable Development

The respondents believe HEIs play a role in the pursuit of a sustainable future.

HEIs are seen in this study as making a significant contribution through the universities' role in knowledge production, research, development, and dissemination on sustainability.

3. Results

Principal barriers to sustainability in HEIs:

- Financial factors,
- Difficulty in attracting students, and
- Competitiveness between the institutions.

Challenges and drivers for sustainability of HEIs

- New ways of funding
- More flexible organizational forms,
- More comprehensive mission,
- Narrowing the gap between polytechnic and university education
- A more tailored educational offer
- Life-long commitment to internationalization,
- More strategic human resource management.

3. Results

Obstacles to sustainability initiatives

Finance is seen as the main obstacle to promoting initiatives for SHEIs or sustainability.

Other obstacles relate to the:

- lack of human resources for the development of sustainability initiatives,
- information and communication about sustainability,
- time availability, commitment, initiatives, and participation.

Most relevant issues that will be faced by HEIs over the next 10 years

- the fund-raising and financing,
- attracting national and international students,
- knowledge transfer,
- quality, and
- internationalization.

4. Discussion

- Most of the interviewees largely agree with Brundtland's perception of the sustainability concept.
- The integration of sustainability in HEIs is not so well understood.
- As in the studies by Wright (e.g., Wright and Wilton, 2012), herein all respondents believe HEIs play a role in the pursuit of a sustainable future.
- Finance is seen as the main obstacle to promoting initiatives for SHEIs or sustainability.
- Our results are in line with the reflections made by Leal Filho et al. (2015b): to meet future challenges, the HEIs should allow formal flexibility, non-formal and informal education for sustainability and identify opportunities in the green economy.

5. Conclusions and future perspectives

- Although sustainability is a broader concept, this exploratory Portuguese study suggests that the SHEI concept is still mostly associated to the survival of institutions and to the environmental dimension of sustainability.
- It is important to have access to national and international good practices and networking, as well as to examples of the implementation of sustainability in HEIs because this could provide important clues about how Portuguese HEIs could meet the challenges.



5. Conclusions and future perspectives

- As in other countries, the evidence obtained suggests that there is slow movement towards and few strategies for the implementation of sustainability in Portuguese HEIs.
- Finally, raising more funding, attracting more students, transferring knowledge, promoting quality and excellence, and increasing the internationalization of HEIs seem to be the most prominent issues for the future of Portuguese HEIs.



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Thank you for your attention!

Ana Marta Aleixo (Ph.D. Candidate)

University Aberta (Portugal) – anamartaafsantos@gmail.com

Susana Leal (Ph.D.)

Polytechnic Institute of Santarém (Portugal) –
susana.leal@esg.ipsantarem.pt

Ulisses Miranda Azeiteiro (Ph.D.)

Aberta University and University of Coimbra (Portugal) –
ulisses.azeiteiro@ua.pt