

Implementing Sustainability in Higher Education: The SDS4HEI 7-Step Process Model

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Abstract

This paper introduces a holistic 7-step framework model for implementing sustainable development (SD) in higher education institutions (HEIs) developed within the EU-funded SDS4HEI project. The theory-informed framework is a practical tool to assist HEIs across Europe in embedding SD into their strategies, addressing SDG-related challenges through teaching, research, and governance, and meaningfully connecting their efforts with their respective regional, political, and cultural contexts. This holistic 7-step process model facilitates strategic implementation of SD, integrated across key areas including education, research, governance and operations. The aim of this paper is to show how the SDS4HEI process model provides a roadmap for embedding SD, and supporting SDGs, and to discuss its contributions in the context of strategic management, leadership and innovation. The process begins with analysing the institution's current state and establishing a sustainability vision. Following this, existing activities are mapped to identify strengths and gaps which align with SDGs and strategic objectives. The following steps involve assessing institutional capacity and governance structures, evaluating regional challenges, and visualising key findings to enhance communication and stakeholder engagement. Finally, a gap analysis pinpoints improvement areas to meet regional goals. Each step is examined in detail, showcasing how the framework connects strategic management, leadership, and innovation to SD. To assess its effectiveness, the framework was tested in universities through user testing, providing empirical insights into its applicability and impact on institutional change.. The paper highlights its applicability in driving institutional change, offering valuable insights for HEI leaders, policymakers, and researchers. By aligning institutional goals with global sustainability challenges and responding to regional priorities, the process model provides a versatile tool for advancing sustainability in higher education.

Keywords: governance, higher education, innovation, leadership, sustainability



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