



Reflections on the Wrocław and Hermosillo International Workshops on Campus Sustainability

Authors: Luis Eduardo Velazquez Contreras, David Slim Zepeda Quintana

Abstract

Aim: This paper aims to describe experiences and remarks regarding The International Workshops on Campus Sustainability held on Wrocław, Poland in May 2016 and in Hermosillo, México in June 2016. The objective of these workshops was to discuss ideas for explorative research on campus sustainability and identify fragilities and weaknesses in higher education institutions, which can lead to irreversible losses.

Design / Research methods: The findings presented in this paper were developed through two structured questionnaires used as a data collection instrument as well as discussion during both workshops. In total 51 participants, students, professors and administrative staff of different universities around the world, took part in the discussions.

Conclusions / findings: It is intended to create a new set of indicators of fragility threatening campus viability and sustainable development in general, which may contribute to a path towards sustainable development. Corruption, lack of access to information, lack of knowledge, lack of proper education for students, lack of understanding of sustainable development and hiring bad teachers were perceived as relevant indicators for the identification of fragilities within the university. In this paper, the discrepancy of perspectives among professors, students, and administrative staff is stressed.

Originality / value of the article: The identification of weaknesses and fragilities within higher education institutes may contribute to create more resilient environments and may enable the transition to sustainable development.

Keywords: sustainable development,
campus sustainability, fragility
JEL: Q01, I23, D29

History: received 2016-12-01,
corrected 2016-12-14, accepted
2016-12-14

Introduction

Over the last decades, sustainable development (SD) has been a focal point

in a large number of international political and academic settings. In order to encourage change, education needs to evolve into an education committed

Luis Eduardo Velazquez Contreras
University of Sonora, México
Luis_velazquez@industrial.uson.mx

David Slim Zepeda Quintana
University of Sonora, México
david.zepeda@unison.mx

to sustainability, in particular in higher education (Lambrechts et al. 2013). It has been argued that universities are key in the path towards SD (Lozano 2010, Karatzoglou 2013), since it is through these institutions that knowledge is generated and the necessary human resources are developed. However, the activities that take place at campuses can create a fragile environment and jeopardize this praiseworthy work.

The identification of weaknesses and fragilities in the context of SD is important since these can produce unpredictable damages and collapse the system, a situation that can compromise our survival (Platje 2011, Taleb 2012). This concept can be applied to different organizations, including universities, since these have an impact on the weakening of society through its functioning. This paper aims to describe experiences and remarks regarding The International Workshops on Campus Sustainability held on this issue in Wrocław, Poland in May 2016 and in Hermosillo, México in June 2016.

The Wrocław Workshop

In May 2016, an International Workshop on Campus Sustainability was held in the city of Wrocław, Poland with the purpose of identifying fragilities and weaknesses in higher education institutions, which can lead to irreversible losses. The authors took part in this international workshop on behalf of the Sustainable Development Group of the University of Sonora in Mexico. One of the Mexican participants is a senior sustainability researcher pioneering in implementing sustainability initiatives not only on campus but also in the country. The other participant is a young professor that starts to promote sustainability on campus.

In preparing for the workshop, a fourteen open questions questionnaire

was filled out anonymously by each professor. This was aimed at facilitating the creation of indicators of campus unsustainability, making it possible to compare universities' contribution to sustainable development on an international scale. Then, a second questionnaire was filled out, but this one with the purpose of assessing to what extent we disagree or agree with statements in the context of our impression of our own home university. This questionnaire was an instrument used for collecting data during the workshop. The instrument consisted of seventy six statements classified in the following section: Knowledge and education, Mistakes and learning-by-doing, Governance, Different types of fragilities, Honesty and trust, and Job market. Participants were asked to indicate the extent or their agreement with statements on a seven-point scale. There was a "Don't Know" in case the respondents could not answer.¹

At the workshop, participants were grouped according to their role at the university. At different tables were students, professors and other staff from institutions of higher educations in different countries. Participants were grouped by their level of expertise in sustainability issues because professors tend to participate more in sustainability organizational issues on campus than other staff and students. At the table of professors, the senior professor from Mexico initiated the debate claiming that he felt uncertain about how to answer some statements; he found that some statements were vague, contradictory, or seemingly without sense. This opinion was reinforced by a professor from The Netherlands and from another professor from Germany. The opinions of the other professors were not different. Since they had similar length of

¹ The statements can be found in the Annex of the first article of this special issue.

service in their institutions, they may possess knowledge about many of the issues asked in the statements. For them, it was clear when a statement was feasible to be answered or not. However, they tried to understand as a group those statements that were not understood when they answered the questionnaire individually. In most of statements there were still a lot of uncertainty concerning to their meaning. In spite of this, several important issues were emphasized. The first one is the importance as researcher to fulfill goals and targets in order to get funds for research projects. It was concluded that it is important to have a senior professor with political power within the group of professors, in order to get support from the university's authorities. Without this support, it is complicated to create new research groups or that new groups survive. Having a "sacred cow" is important because higher education institutions are very political organizations where good initiatives can disappear just because a new chair of the department has increased its power. Authorities usually respect senior professors; therefore, no one is really opposing them. The issue of dealing with labour unions was also considered relevant; mainly in the Latin-American context where they have a lot of political power, even being able to close campuses for a while.

At some point of the workshop, all focus groups presented their conclusions. Conclusions from students and staff differed strongly from the professors' conclusions. In general, students were rather concerned about the quality of the education they received; they focus more on issues related to bad professors than the organizational structure in their university. Another difference was that students and staff seem to have a more positive approach than professors to answer any single statement in the questionnaire.

This interesting discrepancy of outcomes among professors, students, and staff raised the question whether and to what extent the knowledge and understanding of institutional behaviors affects the answers. There is not a right or wrong for this question. On one hand, all feedbacks are important. On the other hand, without fully realizing the significance of each statement, feedback becomes sterile. This poses the question what type of information can be most effectively obtained from which stakeholder, which requires deeper research.

The Hermosillo workshop

As a follow-up, in June of 2016, a replication workshop was held in the city of Hermosillo, Sonora, Mexico with the objective of exploring new outcomes and gain more knowledge in identifying fragilities and weaknesses in higher education institutions. The authors served on this occasion as moderators. Participants were graduate students from the Sustainability Graduate Program of the University of Sonora, professors from other departments, and administrative staff. In total twenty six member of the university community attended this workshop.

The same instrument was applied for the data collection and working groups were created seeking a homogenization among the members. Each working group had at least one teacher or researcher. This was done so that the internal discussion in the groups did not depend exclusively on a specific vision. After the internal discussion of the groups, the debate between working groups was opened. The moderators tried to have minimal interaction with the participants to avoid bias in the information that was shared.

During the discussion, several elements were addressed such as the role of professors, researchers, and administrative staff within the university

system as these can have an impact on its integrity. Some participants concluded that factors as the lack of knowledge, critical discussion, honesty and information might produce issues regarding the communication dynamics of the university, creating a very hard working environment and, in the long term, weakening its integrity.

An interesting conclusion from the participants is that fundamental activities in the transition to more sustainable lifestyles are not fully integrated by decision-makers within the university. Activities such as adequate waste management, safety and hygiene of students, teachers and workers and mobility on the campus are neglected. The participants' discussion focused on the fact that there are activities that grab the attention of decision-makers such as academic productivity, infrastructure creation, and the obtaining of economic resources. From the perspective of fragility, this behavior makes a lot of sense as these activities are linked with the bottom line goal of sustainability in organizations; survival. Undoubtedly, the discussion becomes interesting because the question arises whether it is really sustainable to survive with some collateral damage and to what extent these damages make the system fragile.

Corruption, lack of access to information, lack of knowledge, lack of proper education for students, lack of understanding of sustainable development and hiring bad teachers were perceived as the most relevant indicators for the identification of fragilities within the university (Table 1). Indicators such as lack of parking space for students and staff, making mistakes and employment of many free-lance teachers were perceived as irrelevant by the majority of participants. Also a large number of participants found existence of closed networks of family and friends, punishing people for

minor, relatively harmless mistakes, too quick changes in rules, procedures, etc., irrelevant (Table 2).

Concluding remarks

Both Workshops on Campus Sustainability were very interesting events since different opinions and experiences about the contribution of universities around the world committed to the principles of SD were discussed and exchanged. From this perspective, the workshops can be considered a successful and worthy initiative.

In this paper, the discrepancy of perspectives among professors, students, and staff at the first workshop is stressed. This did not happen in the second workshop perhaps because the knowledge and understanding of institutional behaviors were not different enough. It seems that most of the institutional behaviors in universities are known and understood, a precondition for answering the statements in the data collection instrument. Senior professors indicated the need for modifying the questionnaire in order to avoid flaws that lead to uncertainty, ambiguities, and contradictions.

Undoubtedly, the identification of weaknesses and fragilities within universities may contribute to create more resilient environments and support the transition to SD. Corruption, lack of access to information, lack of knowledge, lack of proper education for students, lack of understanding of sustainable development and hiring bad teachers were perceived as relevant indicators for the identification of fragilities within the university. Universities have a great social responsibility in this task, not only because these institutions are in charge of generating the science and the necessary knowledge, but also through the training of professionals committed to SD. There is still much left to do. Nevertheless, initiatives such as The International

Table 1. Indicators perceived as relevant for the identification of fragilities within the university

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
Corruption	26	100.00%
Lack of access to information	26	100.00%
Lack of knowledge	25	96.20%
Lack of proper education for students	25	96.20%
Hiding the truth	24	92.30%
Hiring bad teachers	24	92.30%
Lack of honesty	24	92.30%
Low quality of teaching staff	24	92.30%
Lack of understanding of sustainable development	24	92.30%
Lack of environmental elements in the study program	24	92.30%
Lack of proper waste management	24	92.30%
Lack of trust	24	92.30%

Table 2. Indicators perceived as irrelevant for the identification of fragilities within the university

Indicator	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of parking space for students and staff	16	61.50%
Making mistakes	15	57.70%
Employment of many free-lance teachers	13	50.00%
Existence of closed networks of family and friends	11	42.30%
Punishing people for minor, relatively harmless mistakes	10	38.50%
Lack of knowledge of foreign languages	10	38.50%
Too quick changes in rules, procedures, etc.	10	38.50%
Lack of explanation of decisions by the university management	8	30.80%
Employment of family and friends	8	30.80%
Political influence on employment of lecturers and administration	8	30.80%
High level of secrecy	7	26.90%
Lack of openness to critique	6	23.10%

Workshop on Campus Sustainability can create a firm commitment and constantly improving process by different universities around the world.

An ongoing discussion may stimulate reflection on the importance of elimination of weaknesses threatening or hampering campus sustainability.

Bibliography

Karatzoglou B. 2013, An in-depth literature review of the evolving roles and contributions of universities to education for sustainable development, "Journal of Cleaner Production", vol. 49, pp.44-53.

Lambrechts W., Mulà I., Ceulemans K., Molderez I., Gaeremynck V. (2013), The integration of competences for sustainable development in higher education: an analysis of bachelor programs in management, "Journal of Cleaner Production", vol. 48, pp.65-73.

Lozano R. (2010), Diffusion of sustainable development in universities' curricula: an empirical example from Cardiff University, "Journal of Cleaner Production", 18(7), pp.637-644.

Platje J. (2011), Institutional capital - creating capacity and capabilities for sustainable development, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole.

Taleb N.N. (2012), Antifragile - things that gain from disorder, Penguin Books, London.

Refleksje nad zorganizowanymi we Wrocławiu i w Hermosillo międzynarodowymi warsztatami dotyczącymi podtrzymywalności kampusów

Abstrakt

Cel: Artykuł ma na celu zaprezentowanie doświadczeń i opinii dotyczących Międzynarodowych Warsztatów na temat Podtrzymywalności Kampusu, które odbyły się we Wrocławiu w Polsce w maju oraz w Hermosillo w Meksyku w czerwcu 2016 roku. Warsztaty ukierunkowane były na przedyskutowanie idei poszukiwawczych badań nad podtrzymywalnością kampusu i identyfikacji kruchości i słabości w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego, które mogą prowadzić do nieodwracalnych strat.

Układ / metody badawcze: Wyniki przedstawione w artykule sformułowano na podstawie dwóch ustrukturyzowanych kwestionariuszy służących jako instrument gromadzenia danych, a także na podstawie dyskusji przeprowadzonych podczas obu warsztatów. W dyskusjach tych wzięło udział łącznie 51 uczestników, studentów, profesorów oraz pracowników administracyjnych z różnych uniwersytetów z całego świata.

Wnioski / wyniki: W zamierzeniu miał zostać stworzony nowy zestaw wskaźników kruchości zagrażającej wydolności i ogólnie pojętego zrównoważonego rozwoju kampusów, który mógłby się przyczynić do wkroczenia na ścieżkę zrównoważonego rozwoju. Korupcja, brak dostępu do informacji, brak wiedzy, brak właściwej edukacji studentów, brak zrozumienia zrównoważonego rozwoju oraz zatrudnianie nieodpowiednich nauczycieli były postrzegane jako istotne i powiązane wskaźniki dla identyfikacji kruchości na uniwersytetach. W artykule podkreślono rozbieżności perspektyw pomiędzy profesorami, studentami i pracownikami administracyjnymi.

Oryginalność / wartość artykułu: Identyfikacja słabości i kruchości w instytucjach szkolnictwa wyższego może przyczynić się do stworzenia bardziej sprężystych i odpornych (ang. resilient) środowisk i może umożliwić przemianę w kierunku zrównoważonego rozwoju.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, podtrzymywalność kampusu, kruchość