

## Guest Editorial

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**Editorial to special issue on: Assessing the contribution of higher education institutions to sustainable development**

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## Editorial to special issue on: Assessing the contribution of higher education institutions to sustainable development

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### Background and Research Focus:

Ensuring sustainable development is one of the great global challenges for humanity. Higher education plays a critical role in ensuring that the next generation of decision makers is capably responsive to global societal and environmental needs (Alm et al., 2021; Sassen & Azizi, 2018a, 2018b). These graduates will encounter a work environment that is challenging, constantly changing, and highly competitive, while at the same time being susceptible to sustainability dilemmas and various crises (Storey et al., 2017).

Achieving sustainable development means that sustainability education needs to be diffused as whole institution approach throughout the entire higher education system, encompassing all tasks and elements of the higher education institutions (governance, education, research, outreach, campus operations) and interfaces among them (Hueske & Aggestam Pontoppidan, 2020; Velazquez et al., 2006):

- A key function within the higher education system is that of designing and delivering curricula that create competencies in sustainable development.
- Research for sustainable development requires a transdisciplinary approach.
- Outreach refers to activities and action programs related to the integration of the higher education institution within society. This includes working with other universities, various government and business entities, as well as the broader local community on matters pertaining to sustainable development.
- Beyond education, research and outreach activities, higher education institutions are responsible for the sustainable development of their own operations.
- Implementation of sustainable development in higher education institutions can be euphemistically seen as challenging or, as expressed by Lozano et al. (2013, p. 4), simply 'troublesome'. The way higher education institutions are teaching and promoting sustainability has been widely discussed in the literature while the success

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3 of current strategies has been questioned (Fleming & Oswick, 2014; Wilson &  
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5 Thomas, 2012). Similar the sustainability implementation in operations encounters a  
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7 number of barriers (Hueske & Guenther, 2021). Sustainability assessment is still in its  
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9 infancy (Findler et al., 2018). However, assessment and reporting activities contribute  
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11 to the advancement towards sustainability by pointing out action areas, comparison  
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13 intern and extern, involving stakeholders, and informing future plans (Alghamdi et al.,  
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15 2017; An et al., 2019; Berzosa et al., 2017).  
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20 This was the starting point for this special issue of the International Journal of Sustainability in  
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22 Higher Education (IJSHE) and a paper development workshop during the 7th Responsible  
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24 Management Education Research Conference to add to a sound assessment of the contribution  
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26 of higher education institutions to sustainable development by addressing the requirements for  
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28 sustainability assessment (Sala et al., 2015), accounting and reporting (Azizi et al., 2018;  
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30 Isenmann et al., 2018; Klußmann et al., 2019; Sassen & Azizi, 2018a, 2018b).  
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35 The papers of this special issue contribute in multiple ways to assessing the contribution of  
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37 HEIs to sustainable development. The papers investigate HEIs around the globe and assess  
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39 different aspects of sustainability, relating to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and  
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41 the United Nations Principles of Responsible Management Education (UN PRME).  
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45 Kohl et al. (2021) point out that the contribution of higher education institutions goes beyond  
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47 a whole institution approach of implementing sustainability in all elements of the GEROCO  
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49 model (Hueske & Aggestam Pontoppidan, 2020). Reviewing UN treaties/declarations and  
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51 guidance, they highlight the science and research as neutral basis for political decision making  
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53 and policy development. In contrast Bien & Klußmann, 2021 take a more internal perspective  
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55 by exploring how ambiguities related to the understanding of sustainability in science, higher  
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3 education institutions and society hamper are drive sustainability transition of higher  
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5 education institutions.  
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9 Avelar et al. (2021) interview educators to show the contribution of PRME to sustainable  
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11 development at HEIs by reviewing three GEROCO elements: education, research and  
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13 outreach. Schmidt et al. (2021) contribute to the sustainability assessment at the interface of  
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15 education and outreach with a case study on capacity-building projects. They provide an  
16  
17 analytical framework to facilitate measuring interdisciplinary understanding regarding  
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19 sustainable energy systems.  
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24 The case study by Elmassah et al. (2021) shows how Cairo University could learn from the  
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26 role models as Leuphana University of Lüneburg in Germany and Tokyo University in Japan.  
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28 Thereby, they touch on governance, education, outreach and campus operations.  
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32 Three papers especially highlight how HEIs contribute to certain SDGs: Dalla Gasperina et al.  
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34 (2021) add the operations element with their research on smart campuses and how they  
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36 contribute to the SDGs, especially number 4 and 9 in Brazil. Whereas, Miralles-Cardona et al.  
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38 (2021) focuses on assessing SDG 4.7 and 5, by assessing gender competences within nascent  
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40 teachers in Spain. Furthermore, Alm, et al. (this issue) add the student perspective on key  
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42 competencies related to sustainable development, especial they conclude that real-life  
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44 experiences enhance interpersonal competencies for sustainability.  
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49 These papers demonstrate that HEIs contribute in a variety of ways to sustainable  
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51 development. The papers in this special issue addresses a variety of the GEROCO elements  
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53 and their measurability. This leads to an ongoing challenge to report and to assess this  
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55 contribution against for example university rankings. Galleli et al. (2021) compare UI Green  
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57 Metric and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings to contribute to  
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59 governance, assessment and reporting of HEIs sustainability initiatives.  
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3 Country specific studies have added to our understanding of integrated reporting and social  
4 sustainability assessments. Aras et al., (2021) evaluate integrated reporting in the higher  
5 education by conducting a case study in Turkey. Ayuso et al. (2021) advances our thinking on  
6 integrated social value analysis and applies it to eighth universities in Spain.  
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13 Future research is needed in two directions: First, how to implement the whole institution  
14 approach by addressing all GEROCO elements: education, research, outreach, and campus  
15 operations and how they enhance each other (Hueske & Aggestam Pontoppidan, 2020;  
16 Isenmann et al., 2020) .  
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24 Another avenue relates assessing the contribution to sustainable development by the HEIs for  
25 all those elements. Having better measures could enhance the credibility and comparability,  
26 reporting, but also highlight best cases, show opportunities for improvement and collaboration  
27 as demonstrated by the SDG analysis for e-learning, especially MOOCs (Hueske et al, 2021;  
28 (Hueske et al., 2021).  
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