

Abstract

How to Measure the Elephant?

A Systematic Approach for Measuring Sustainability at Higher Education Institutions

For couple of decades sustainability has been either ignored or going unaddressed until its urgency has become so obvious that no longer we could ignore the elephant in the room. However due to the complexity of sustainability concept and lack of common holistic definition for the term, we have ended up with many different definitions which often address only a part of what sustainability is about. It again reminds us of the Rumi story about the elephant in the dark room. Since we have not prior knowledge and understanding of sustainability, we have therefore tried to construct an image by touching only parts of the issue and not the phenomenon as a whole. Similar to the people in the Rumi story who described the creature differently after touching only legs, trunk, tail or ears, we also have had difficulties to agree on the definition for addressing and finding an approach for measuring the sustainability in the our society.

The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can be considered as the main centre for creating, preserving and improving knowledge and intellectual assets. Therefore it is natural to expect them to take responsibility toward global challenges by emphasising on importance of sustainability on their vision and mission statement, implementing sustainability in their operations and by promoting sustainability culture through education research and community outreach.

This paper is an attempt to address a systematic approach for measuring implementation of sustainability at HEIs after defining a holistic model which defines what a sustainable university is. In addition to that, this study has a brief review on declaration for sustainability among these institutions and the way that HEIs have obliged themselves to take responsibility by signing the declarations.

This paper is the result of 3 years research project. After designing a tool with 50 indicators for measuring implementation of sustainability, 20 international universities were selected and evaluated. Finally their status was compared with what the University of Oslo (UiO) has achieved with regard to sustainability in 2010. It provided necessary information to set an action plan to improve the activities and showing more commitment to sustainability issues at the institution. The re-evaluation report in 2012 has proved a significant improvement at the level of sustainability implementation at UiO.

Maryam Faghihimani

Sustainability Adviser, University of Oslo

Core Group member of UNICA Green Academic Footprint (UGAF)

and Nordic Sustainable Campus Network (NSCN)