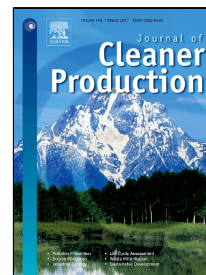


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Assessing Sustainability in higher education curricula: a critical reflection on validity issues

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Abstract

While curricular assessments can give insight as to the extent sustainability is integrated into higher education study programs, issues remain regarding how assessments are conducted. Previous research has identified and compared various sustainability assessment tools for higher education, but there is a gap in literature studying issues arising from measurement. This paper highlights the need for discussions on this topic by exploring validity issues arising from a case study and discusses the potential of utilizing a supplementary course file during curricular assessments. To achieve this objective, a KU Leuven Faculty of Economics and Business program has been assessed using two different approaches, namely 1) a scan of a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) file and 2) an instructor self-assessment via a supplementary course file. Based on this research, these two approaches to curricular assessment yield substantially different results, which gives rise to the need to further consider the validity of such assessments. While utilizing an instructor self-assessment (e.g., a supplementary course file) during assessments can help overcome some potential shortcomings and biases of ECTS file scans, both approaches are flawed in assessing true sustainability integration into a program. The varying conceptualizations of sustainability and the lack of uniformly adopted assessment approaches has the potential to create validity issues with the assessment of sustainability in higher education. Acknowledging sustainable development as a contested concept, and developing a faculty-specific conceptualization, can help in approaching assessments in a meaningful way.

Keywords: Sustainability assessment, curricular assessment, higher education, business school, STARS

List of abbreviations: AACSB: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business; AASHE: Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE); CSR: corporate social responsibility; ECTS: European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System; EfS: education for sustainability; ESD: education for sustainable development; EFMD: European Foundation for Management Development; FEB: Faculty of Economics and Business; HEI: higher education institution; MIBEM: Master of International Business Economics and Management; PRME: Principles for Responsible Management Education; SD: sustainable development; STARS: Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System

1. Introduction

The integration of sustainable development (SD) has become a relevant topic in higher education and increasingly, higher education institutions (HEIs) are attempting to take responsibility as agents in promoting SD principles (Lozano et al., 2015; Lukman and Glavič, 2006; Ramos et al., 2015). HEIs can contribute significantly to fostering the transition towards a sustainable society due to their double role: 1) creating knowledge and transferring this knowledge to the society, and 2) preparing students for their future role in society (de Lange, 2013; Disterheft et al., 2013). Business schools

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