

An interdisciplinary approach towards sustainable governance of universities: the case of Lithuania

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Abstract: This article presents the concept of sustainability in an interdisciplinary context by adapting the principles of sustainability adopted in the education system and presenting some evidence from Lithuanian universities based on a survey conducted in 2006-2007. Students and university lecturers were surveyed, in order to define the impact of the discipline and principles of sustainability as imbedded in the daily life of a university, its curricula and university governance.

Keywords: sustainable development, university governance, interdisciplinary approach, Lithuania

1. Introduction

In the process of sociological transformation towards sustainability, public institutions, and in particular state universities, play a critical role. The present model of our producer/consumer society is not sustainable. The surrounding environment provides us with obvious evidence of this. We face climate change, decreasing biodiversity and growing global migration to wealthy regions (Calder and Clugston, 2002). If consumption of resources continues without any limitation, we will jeopardize the welfare of future generations and satisfaction of their needs by wasting our natural resources. Research conducted by universities in many countries support the assumption that understanding and implementation the concept of sustainability in high schools require deeper and wider studies, especially using an interdisciplinary approach.

The aim of the paper is to investigate the level of applying sustainable development policies at Lithuanian universities, researching both the evidence in sustainable governance of tertiary education institutions and the scope of sustainability discipline in studies' curricula. This paper was prepared through a systematic analysis of the academic literature, general and logical analysis and by using methods of comparison and generalization, as well as quantitative research method of structured survey technique.

The present paper is structured as follows. The concept of sustainability has both narrow and broad meanings. Using the term of sustainability, we can talk about building a sustainable global society. Therefore, Section 2 presents the concept of sustainability and analyzes how the principle of sustainability is implemented in the education system. After all, universities must today assume the task of improving and perfecting the educational system in a way that will stimulate a new mentality in the people of the 21st century. Section 3 defines the interdisciplinary character of university studies, in the sense of curricula and programmes, by presenting the experience of Kaunas Faculty of Humanities, Vilnius University, Lithuania. Section 4 covers the findings of the national survey in Lithuania on adapting the principles of sustainability in university governance and some implications regarding curricula as well.

2. The Paradigm of Sustainability and its Application to Higher Education

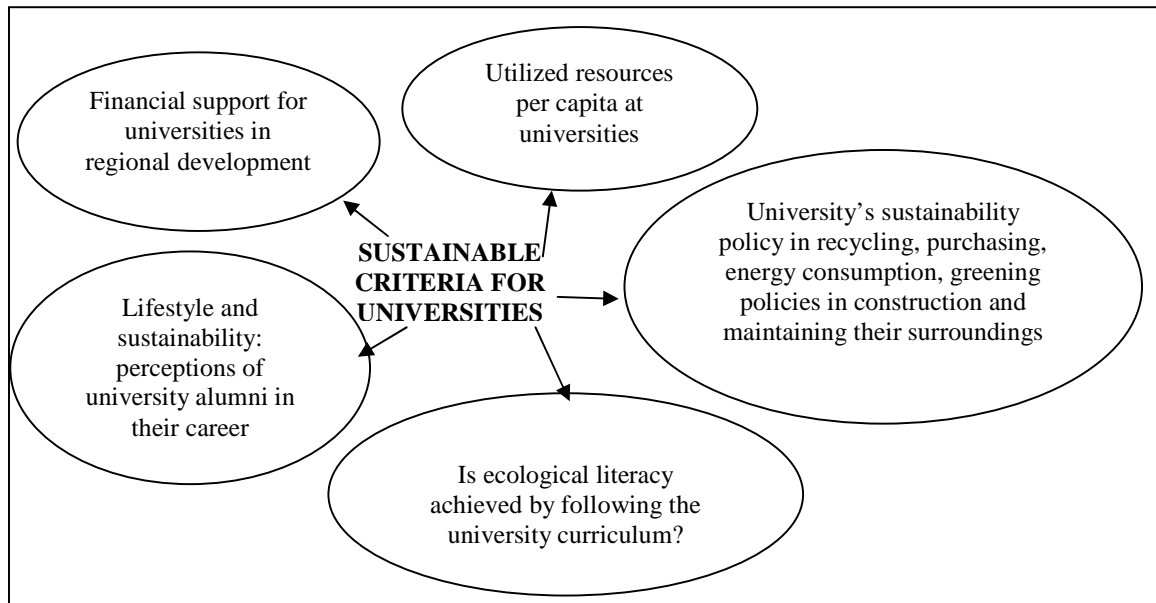
Human needs include employment, education and learning, health care, the possibility of using a healthy natural environment, positive regional identity, an accountable and generally elected government and more (Viederman, 2003). This is an immediate necessity that requires both institutional and financial responsibility. It is necessary to act and consume in compliance with the principles of sustainability.

The concept of sustainability is important and relevant, because it requires integrating the opinions of different people, different business philosophies and academic fields. Therefore, sustainability is an often discussed and mentioned word. An immense amount of work has been accomplished on why we need to be sustainable and how we could work towards it. Since it is a relatively new concept, there is more than one definition of it and at least as many prescribed ways of achieving it.

Today there are over 60 definitions of sustainability, but the idea contains at least one of the following important components: concern with the long-term condition of the environment; apprehension regarding the welfare of future generations; condemnation of rapid population growth and awareness of the possibility of maintaining economic growth in the face of scarce resources (Kooten and Bulte, 2000; Grundey et al., 2007). The term “sustainable development” has been questioned, because it emphasises economic growth. It is understood to require continuous economic growth in terms of real incomes and output. This is in accordance with the Pareto-principle, which is an important basic assumption of social sustainability and social policy “In a growing economy, it is possible that a legitimate welfare improvement occurs making at least one person better off, without making others persons worse off” (Vehkamäki, 2005: 9).

Universities are without dispute among the most sustainable organisations, if “sustainable” is understood as being merely long-lasting. “*One study ‘identified only sixty-six organizations or institutions that have been in continuous existence in Europe since the Reformation of the seventeenth century’: 62 of them were universities!*” (Weick, 1976). It might sound surprising, but much of this durability might be attributable to a characteristic of organisations of experts that makes them so hard to manage. As organisations built up of experts they are, at least their academic side, „loosely coupled systems“ (Weick, 1976). They are to some degree self-organising with low coordination costs. Their duty to contribute to the sustainable development of a globalised society is undisputed. However, it is required to get more specific ideas as to what the main fields of action should be.

Figure 1. Proposed Criteria for Sustainable Governance of a University.



Source: Author's own elaboration.

To adopt the principles of sustainability at the core of all human activities will require some fundamental changes, many of which will be very difficult technically, culturally and politically (Grundey, 2005). Universities, as centres of innovation and learning, should be at the forefront of this. Such a re-orientation of mission in higher education (HE) would necessarily involve a significant a) re-assessment of the curriculum, b) re-focusing of organisational structures and c) auditing and re-aligning the management and pedagogic systems (Grundey et al., 2007).

Sustainable curricula cannot be divorced from sustainable institutions. The *sustainability curriculum* should not centre solely on discipline focused transfer of information; its educational impact resides in stimulating interactive (student-centred) and collaborative learning processes across the university. Although there is a wide-ranging debate on the nature of sustainable university education, a broad consensus has emerged for three main learning outcomes. These are articulated by Rowe (2002) as:

- increased care regarding the future of society and notions of 'intergenerational equality' and justice between generations;
- empowerment of students and a heightened belief that they, themselves, can make a difference;

- an increased personal willingness and commitment to participate in solving societal and environmental problems.

Clugston and Calder (1999) claim that institutions must take action in *seven areas* to make progress toward sustainability: 1) written statements of mission and goals; 2) academic disciplines, program requirements and research; 3) the ecological and social contexts of the campus; 4) systems of hiring, tenure and promotion; 5) patterns of production and consumption; 6) administrative leadership and student life; 7) local and global outreach and partnerships. Therefore, the author of this article proposes the criteria for sustainable governance of a university given in Figure 1.

Aiming at the implementation of set tasks, Filho (2002) outlines *six guidelines for promoting the teaching of sustainability and designing curricula in HE*:

- 1) sustainability should not be seen as a discrete discipline. The introduction of sustainability into the curriculum involves the provision of new skills directed towards;
- 2) the understanding and achievement of a harmonic ‘people-environment-nature’ relationship. It is predicated as much on winning ‘hearts and minds’ as formal instruction;
- 3) sustainability is not the exclusive preserve of one established discipline. It is part of a shared life and common domain. It is interdisciplinary in its philosophy and focus;
- 4) there are many and flexible approaches to teaching sustainability. The main pedagogic thrust should be towards raising consciousness;
- 5) the precepts of sustainability need to be demonstrated. The best way to reach out to people who do not understand sustainability, or who resist the philosophy, is to demonstrate its essence and practical application. Systematic progress in teaching sustainability cannot be made without changes in the content or focus of curricula;
- 6) it is a myth that only a handful of experts are qualified to engage in education regarding sustainability. Sustainability has universal currency. Indeed, without realising it, many practitioners and university teachers have unwittingly subscribed to its fundamental principles and core values and have practised sustainability.

3. Reforming the Higher Education System Focusing on an Interdisciplinary Approach

The swift demise of the Soviet Union and the eclipse of its hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) dramatically heightened the appreciation of the vital role of critical thinking among university students and staff and the role of universities as an important independent voice in the analysis of society (Grundey, 2005; Ciegis et al., 2005; Ciegis and Grundey, 2005). General education's special contribution to encouraging and training the habits of mind, and under-girding the university's role of social criticism appears more needed than ever, especially as academic freedom and free expression in academia seem to be becoming more threatened in the new millennium. Reforms of HE are taking place in all CEE countries, which is contributing to the Europisation of these HE systems (Grundey, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). CEE universities have introduced a three-layer HE system, comprising of bachelor, master and PhD studies. They have established links with scientific research groups and have started developing partnerships with business entities. Therefore, the goal of a quality labour force has to be on the mind of every university rector and administrator, in order to adhere to market trends and demands.

The recent external, expert assessment of study programmes in Management and Business Administration at the Universities of Lithuania, which was carried out in 2006-2007, suggested that the number of study programmes in this field has to be considerably reduced, which will be a painful procedure. The final conclusions from this external assessment have not been officially announced yet, but from the perception of Kaunas Faculty of Humanities, Vilnius University (VU KHF), Lithuania, the pivotal conclusion regarded the major strengths of VU KHF in its capability to run *interdisciplinary study programmes*, such as *Business Informatics* (Bachelor degree), *Lithuanian Language and Advertising* (Bachelor degree), *Cultural Management* (Bachelor degree), *Russian and English Languages* (Bachelor degree) (Grundey et al., 2004a). The experts encourage more opportunities for uniting three major academic schools which are present at VU KHF – social sciences, the humanities and physical sciences – which leaves immense space for a better balance of staff, courses, student flows and income distribution (Grundey, 2004c). VU KHF has also a good record of combining academic schools in PhD dissertations. The cases of merging academic ideas from IT and marketing, IT and economics, IT and languages have become an established tradition rather than a one-off study.

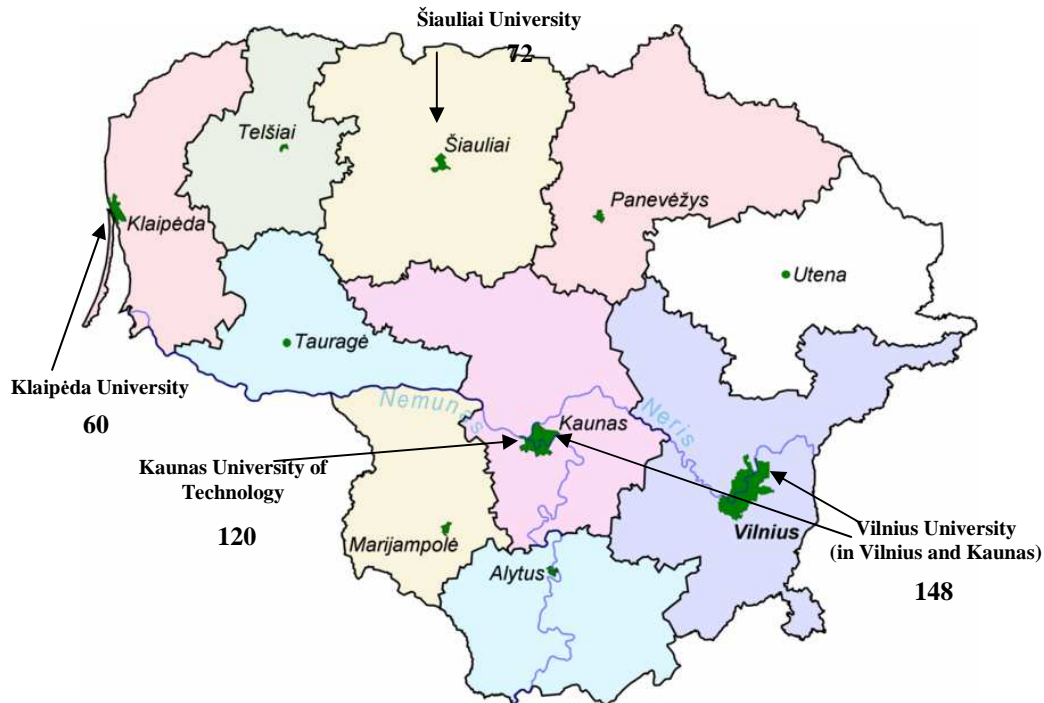
Apart from the functional and structural reforms of HE in CEE countries, the quality of studies and tools for measuring it have also been at the focus of attention (Grundey, 2003; Grundey et al., 2003; Grundey et al., 2004b). The impact of university studies is of a broad character, embracing current university students and alumni, current and potential employers, teaching and administrative staff. This consequently determines the current market demand for qualified employees and the need to forecast and implement necessary improvements to current study programmes. An extensive survey of the quality of university studies was performed at VU KHF in autumn 2003 – winter 2004 for a Master's degree study programme in *Marketing and Trade Management* (Grundey et al., 2003; Grundey et al., 2004b). A constructive discussion with marketing employers and experts ensured strengthening of the curriculum by (a) striking a balance between theoretical and practical courses, (b) inviting a social partner onto the board of this master's degree study programme and (c) sharing the experience of alumni, currently employed in the field of their speciality. According to a Decision of the Senate of Vilnius University (which came into force in December, 2004), study programmes are reviewed and assessed on an annual basis (instead of a 2-4 year basis) at the end of each calendar year, which serves as a good, but challenging, practice.

4. National Survey on Sustainable Governance of Universities: The Case of Lithuania

4.1 Methodology

Within the theoretical framework of the topic, a national survey was conducted in Lithuanian universities to research into the application of the principles of sustainability in university governance and study curricula, as well as general knowledge regarding the issues of sustainability. This paper presents only partial results of the survey, which was conducted in the first half of 2007, as indicated in Table 1.

Figure 2. The Geographical Location of the Four Lithuanian Universities Surveyed, 2007. The four Lithuanian universities surveyed are indicated on the map, together with the number of respondents who participated in the national survey.



Source: own elaboration based on Administrative Map of Lithuania (St.-Anna-Schule, 2009).

Table 1. The Survey Scenario and Timetable, 2007.

Survey stages	2007					
	January	February	March	April	May	June
Identification of the subjects of the research and research methods, sample selection, preparation of the questionnaire						
Pilot survey of 20 respondents						
Distribution of the questionnaire						
Systemisation and analysis of the primary data						
Findings and recommendations						

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The subjects of the research were *students and lecturers* from four Lithuanian universities, listed below:

- Vilnius University (VU) (South-Eastern Lithuania) – 148 respondents;
- Kaunas University of Technology (KTU) (Central Lithuania) – 120 respondents;
- Šiauliai University (Northern Lithuania) (ŠU) – 72 respondents;
- Klaipėda University (KU) (Western Lithuania, on the coast) – 60 respondents.

These four towns were selected since they are the biggest towns in the country and they all have universities (Figure 1). The questionnaire contained 26 questions, four of them were allotted to profiling a respondent. Responses to four questions will be detailed in the following subchapter.

4.2 Findings

The profile of the respondents from these four Lithuanian universities was as follows:

- 226 females and 174 males.
- 105 (26%) respondents were in the age group of 18-20, 137 (34.%) respondents belonged to the age group of 26-30, while 77 (19%) respondents indicated that they were over 30.
- 314 (78%) respondents were students and 86 (22%) indicated themselves to be lecturers or administrative staff of a university.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, sustainable development requires the efforts of all participants of a community. In the survey, universities are perceived as academic communities with their own sets of rules and behaviour. In the questionnaire, it was important to find out what the potential sources of knowledge regarding sustainable development are.

Many students obtained information about sustainable development from their university professors (46%). It is also thought that university professors have a moral imperative to give their students a positive attitude towards sustainable development. Internet resources are the second most common source (21%), alongside scientific and popular literature (19%). A considerably smaller number of students gained information about sustainability in the press (10%) and by watching TV programmes (4%). It was quite surprising to find that parents did not play any role in forming students' attitude towards sustainability.

Even though many respondents indicated that they learned about sustainability from their university professors, more than half of the student respondents (170 or 54%) mentioned that they do not have courses related to ecology, environmental protection or sustainability. Among the students, who indicated that their disciplines contain some aspects of sustainability or have full courses on it, 58% of them study at Vilnius University, Lithuania, which is an important indicator in the research. The least number of students (3%) who have contact with issues of sustainability in their courses were from Šiauliai University in Northern Lithuania.

Another focus of the national research on sustainable development in Lithuania was on the role of student unions in the institutions of higher education. It is well known that student unions represent their students in a faculty or university as a whole. They perform quite a large number of functions, *e.g.*, protecting and monitoring the rights and interests of students; participating in the study process by proposing improvements in study programmes and quality; caring about the social well-being of students; providing options for students' leisure time and cultural life; developing international relations; developing relations with other student unions in national universities, business partner-institutions and social groups; mediating open and fair academic discussions on issues regarding sustainability society and the judicial development of the state; adhering to academic and national culture and traditions.

As the Lithuanian survey indicates, a student union might participate in the process of promoting sustainability on a university campus. First of all, it could introduce students to the university policies on saving resources, as mentioned by 31% of respondents (a total of 315) in the four Lithuanian universities surveyed. It could be very useful, if student unions promoted the university's mission and vision, especially to freshmen (27% of respondents), as indicated by Scott (2004). It was suggested by the respondents that student unions could initiate extra-curricula activities (21%) aimed at fostering sustainable development and resource saving programmes. According to the opinion of respondents, student unions should also participate in and coordinate "green" projects on campus or in the town (113 respondents), as well as distribute flyers on this topic on campus (105 respondents).

The majority of respondents (65%) suggested that university administration and teaching staff failed to encourage the university community to save resources. A positive answer was received only from 15% of the participants. A large proportion of respondents from each university stated that they were not encouraged by the university community to save resources

5. Discussion and recommendations

Educators from various disciplines should discuss and identify points of agreement and disagreement. They should reflect on how education should prepare people for using their rights and responsibilities in society. Education should empower people rather than teach them. Many participants reflected first of all on the role of educators not as a source of knowledge and moral admonition, but as a guide, process facilitator and a learner at the same time. Some participants would like educators to have more knowledge of the principles of sustainable development and other issues of an ecological nature. Educators should learn that the empowerment of individuals to participate effectively in the process of social change is a key goal and that participation relates to direct intervention that will impact on the direction, progress and dynamics of social, economic and environmental development. Such intervention will include decisions and actions: as consumers, professionals, employees/employers and voters (or in other forums of social decision making; within their homes and communities).

As the Lithuanian survey indicates, sustainable university governance was researched along two administrative streams: a) university administration and teaching staff and b) student unions. The majority of respondents (65%) suggested that university administration and teaching staff failed to encourage the university community to save resources.

Respondents suggested that students' union might participate in the process of promoting sustainability on a university campus in the following ways: a) introduce students to the university policies on saving resources, as mentioned (31% of respondents); b) promote the university's mission and vision, especially to freshmen (27% of respondents); c) initiate extra-curricula activities (21%) aimed at fostering sustainable development and resource saving programmes; d) participate in and coordinate "green" projects on campus or in the town (113 respondents).

54% of surveyed Lithuanian student respondents mentioned that they do not have courses, related to ecology, environmental protection or sustainability in their university curricula. Among the students, who indicated that their disciplines contain some aspects of sustainability or have full courses on it, 58% of them study at Vilnius University, Lithuania.

Sustainability is a process of ensuring the wise use of all resources within the framework in which environmental, social and economic factors are integrated. The university is committed to

placing sustainability at the heart of its mission: making sustainability integral to the delivery of research, teaching and operational objectives; taking positive action promoting the continual improvement of the environment; and setting and achieving clearly defined objectives and targets for sustainable development.

The university is seeking to build on its environmental policy and undertaking the following six actions to:

1. Make sustainability a corporate priority:

- encourage students and staff to incorporate informed perspectives on sustainability within their work;
- develop the capacities of academic staff to promote understanding of the principles and practice of sustainability;
- establish a corporate culture which seeks to embed sustainability in all aspects of the university;
- recognise, celebrate and reward achievement promoting the university as a sustainable organisation.

2. Develop and deliver appropriate teaching and research:

- expose all students to the concepts of social, environmental and ethical stewardship;
- encourage students to consider issues of sustainability in their academic work, so they become active advocates of sustainable development; and
- support and encourage interdisciplinary research into issues of sustainable development.

3. Take a leadership role in issues of sustainability:

- set best practice standards, meet or surpass the requirements of environmental legislation and commit to a process of continual improvement of the environment;
- promote awareness, both within the university and the wider community, of all legislative, economic, technical and market developments that assist progress towards sustainability;
- establish a university audit group to oversee the implementation of this policy and associated programmes; and
- encourage and actively support the work of the Environmental Action Group.

4. Contribute to stable community building:

- build partnerships and create local information and learning networks for sharing experience and knowledge of sustainability issues with all stakeholders;

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- operate in ways that maximise social and economic benefit while minimising any adverse impact on the local community; and
- invest in staff development, value stakeholder involvement and promote social inclusion and equity.

5. Maintain and develop the University in a sustainable manner:

- promote continual improvement in maintenance practices and establish sustainability guidelines for internal and external design teams and contractors working on new building and refurbishment projects;
- develop procurement procedures with all elements of the supply chain to ensure social, ethical and environmental criteria are integrated into programmes aimed at achieving the best value;
- develop accounting procedures which articulate clearly the benefits of sustainable development;
- maximise the efficient use of energy and materials, continually improve pollution prevention measures and increase use of renewable resources;
- minimise waste generation in research and teaching activity and encourage repair, reuse and recycling as being preferable to the responsible disposal of surplus materials;
- promote practical measures to reduce the impact of travel to and between university sites; and
- establish systems to facilitate data capture for benchmarking.

6. Monitor and report on progress towards sustainability:

- manage responsibly the social, environmental and economic impacts of all university policies and practices and assess potential improvements within the university's decision-making processes;
- conduct reviews of all university policies, management performance standards and operations based on internal targets for sustainability and best standards of practice;
- make available to all stakeholders the results of social, environmental and sustainability audits and impact assessments carried out by or for the university; and
- overall monitoring of this policy will be the responsibility of the university's audit group for sustainability.

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***Interdyscyplinarne podejście do zrównoważonego zarządzania uniwersytetami:
przypadek Litwy***

Streszczenie

Poniższy artykuł przedstawia pojęcie zrównoważonego rozwoju w interdyscyplinarnym kontekście poprzez wykorzystanie zasad zrównoważonego rozwoju przyjętych w systemie edukacji oraz zaprezentowanie wyników badań ankietowych przeprowadzonych w latach 2006-2007 na litewskich uniwersytetach. Zbadano studentów oraz wykładowców akademickich w celu określenia wpływu analizowanej dyscypliny oraz zasad zrównoważonego rozwoju jako elementów codziennego życia uniwersyteckiego, programów zajęć oraz zarządzania uczelniami wyższymi.

Słowa kluczowe: zrównoważony rozwój, zarządzanie uniwersytetem, podejście interdyscyplinarne, Litwa.