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An International Review of Sustainability in Higher Education Studies: A Messy Concept with Contradictory Attitudes

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Abstract

Sustainability in Higher Education (SHE) represents a comprehensive and complex set of plans and initiatives involving institutional context (universities and their management board for “greening the campuses”), and educational actors (students, teachers, community stakeholders) in pursuit of suitable ways for a sustainable environment in teaching, learning and promoting community values. This paper reviews 26 international selected studies on SHE from a pool of 137 identified in academic databases, published between 2000 and 2014. The analysis identified five constructs that pervade such studies: (i) students’ views on sustainability; (ii) students’ literacy; (iii) students’ attitudes; (iv) main pedagogies employed; (vii) universities’ roles. Based on these constructs it was found that: (i) students have a broad and confused view of sustainability, although they associate it with practice and attitudinal change, mainly towards the environment; (ii) they present low level of literacy for sustainability; (iii) their attitudes tend to be contradictory when compared with their beliefs, as they are inclined to remain in a comfort zone of no change; (iv) they are typically trained by technical means or business modules on sustainability, but criticise lectures and tutorials, preferring participatory activities; (v) universities’ roles are seen as promotion of sustainability awareness and adoption of environmental management, although these are not clear missions for the managers of these institutions.

Keywords: *Sustainability in Higher Education (SHE); environmental literacy; environmental learning; environmental attitudes.*
