

Embedding Sustainability Knowledge into Higher Education

The Role of Accreditation and Quality Assurance

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Sulitest Impact

Abstract

In the struggle to guide humanity towards addressing the Earth environmental crisis characterized primarily by climate change, declining biosphere integrity, and mass extinction, higher education institutions (HEIs) and the quality assurance (QA) agencies that accredit them have important roles to play. Yet only now and only timidly are they beginning to appreciate how great these roles are—and this only after considerable delay. Upon this premise, this paper traces early efforts to address the challenge of sustainability in higher education, identifies a lack of robust quality assurance guidance on sustainability within accreditation standards, highlights the potential effectiveness of such guidance when explicitly formulated, provides examples of initial efforts to embed sustainability into accreditation indicators, and identifies an innovative instrument that measures student sustainability knowledge, helps effect curricular transformation, and helps demonstrate societal impact to institutional stakeholders such as accreditation commissions and quality assurance agencies.

Keywords: Sustainability, assessment, curriculum, UN Sustainable Development Goals, Sulitest, quality education

Sustainability and Higher Education

Early appeals calling for serious and urgent engagement with the challenge of sustainability by higher education were made over two decades ago and rereading them today in 2026 is a painful reminder of just how much time has been lost.

Higher education institutions bear a profound, moral responsibility to increase the

awareness, knowledge, skills, and values needed to create a just and sustainable future. Higher education plays a critical but often overlooked role in making this vision a reality. [Yet] it is the people coming out of the world's best colleges and universities that are leading us down the current unhealthy, inequitable, and unsustainable path. (Cortese, 2003, p.16)

The reasons proffered over 20 years ago for inaction remain the same today: the complexity of sustainability issues, that the issues cross disciplinary boundaries jealously guarded by professionals ill-prepared for cooperative efforts and responsive mainly to long-established incentives of tenure and publication gained within very specific disciplinary limits, and that faculty are loathe to challenge common assumptions held both by students and themselves: i.e., that “humans are the dominant species and separate from the rest of nature; resources are free and inexhaustible; the Earth's ecosystems can assimilate all human impacts; technology will solve most of society's problems; all human needs and wants can be met through material means; and individual success is independent of the health and well-being of communities, cultures, and the life support system” provided by a healthy planet (Cortese, 2003, p.17).

The declaration of the ‘United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development’ (ESD), Resolution 57/254 of 2003 constituted a similar early appeal to infuse sustainability into the ethos and outcomes of higher education via an international movement to green university curriculum. The promise of ESD was grounded in the belief that there had been a growth in awareness that changes to the curriculum for sustainable development must suffuse all of education and the whole of HEI's approach to the external world. And despite identifying similar barriers to curricular change—i.e., lack of funding, perverse subsidies, departmental and disciplinary barriers, ivory-tower teaching traditions, and the persistence of obsolete mindsets—the ESD declaration fostered a sense that higher education was ready to engage earnestly with the growing Earth crisis. As one educator concluded in 2005: “there now seems to be growing agreement that HEIs should equip all their students with ‘environmental literacy’ and that sustainability should be central to concerns both in HEI curricula and in operational practice.” (Haigh, 2007, p.1).

That this transformative change across higher education has not taken place in the last two decades can be attested by the 2023 report *Climate Change Education: A summary of research reviews, assessment instruments, and ways forwards* (ASSA, 2023), published by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia. The authors of this report remind us that scientific research has enabled unprecedented advances in our understanding of Earth's climate processes, presenting us with “a clear and reliable view of the changes taking place in our climate, the direction in which those changes could be headed, and the significance

and potential consequences of human activities in initiating, escalating, and reversing those changes.” However, the authors continue:

This paper does not set out to rehearse these findings or to reassert the urgency of addressing them. Its impetus comes instead from the observation that developments in societies’ knowledge of climate change have not been matched by our efforts to develop, update, co-ordinate, and disseminate educational initiatives in the general domain of climate, environment, and sustainability. This is despite the extensive efforts of a number of educational associations. The time now seems right to marshal the efforts of researchers in support of the efforts of education systems and teachers to align productive policies and practices with advances in knowledge about the nature and significance of changes in our climate. (ASSA, 2003, p.4)

Twenty years have since passed, and the message remains as unchanged as it is urgent—i.e., that it’s time that HEI’s start teaching about sustainability in earnest and that accrediting bodies require them to do so as an indicator of quality education.

Sustainability and Accreditation Standards

The inertia of HEI’s in the greening of the curriculum, however, is due in part to how little guidance and encouragement they have historically received from the quality assurance profession. As we see below, it is unlikely that HEI’s will address the Earth crisis earnestly when quality assurance agencies themselves have not greened their own accreditation standards and indicators, not to mention the definition of what constitutes a quality education on a planet in existential crisis. Using accreditation to get HEI’s to engage more earnestly and urgently in greening both curriculum and campus is an action lever as powerful as it is neglected.

Indeed, it is instructive appreciating the extent to which national and international accrediting and quality assurance bodies in higher education—through formal accreditation standards—require or encourage HEI’s to address SDG issues and goals as a mark of quality education as described by SDG-4.7.¹⁾ To gain initial insight into such a question, a simple and intuitive approach presents itself—a word search of quality assurance compliance standards.

1) UN Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 reads: “By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture’s contribution to sustainable development.” The corresponding achievement indicator for SDG-4.7 reads: “Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development are mainstreamed in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education and (d) student assessment.”

Indeed, by using a selection of major accreditation standards most widely used in higher education today (both institutional and programmatic), we can perform a textual search for key words, concepts, and ideas potentially relatable to major ecological concepts or environmental issues as described in the 17 *UN Sustainable Development Goals*. Key words can be selected for their relevance to the SDGs, to the larger systemic threats to climate stability, as well as to ethical principles that should guide HEI's in defining what constitutes a quality education. To increase the accuracy and reliability of the findings, we should perform word searches only upon language included in formal accreditation standards and indicators, i.e., the only text with which institutions are required to demonstrate compliance. As such, we should exclude auxiliary procedural or promotional text related to the accreditation process or agency profile. Similarly, key words that are found, but whose meaning is clearly non-ecological in intent (e.g., the learning *environment*; a *climate* of collegiality; *sustainable* revenue streams, etc.), can be listed but should not be tallied as positive indicators.

In this spirit, we applied this very method to twenty-four accreditation regimes and oversight bodies located across Europe, the United States, and Africa, and included major oversight agencies such as CHEA (Council for Higher Education Accreditation), INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education), ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and others. Together, these associations, commissions and QA agencies accredit some 10,000+ HEI's or business programs. The results of this text-based investigation are displayed in Figure 1 and evoke a number of initial remarks. First, while words traditionally used in standard guidelines indicating quality, professionalism, and positive behavior—such as *ethic*, *responsibility*, *integrity*, *impact*, and *social impact*—appear in large numbers, they are not used in the specific context of sustainability or environmental protection. The words *environment* and *sustainability* are used 140+ and 70+ times respectively but only 8 and 15 times respectively as applied to *environmental* sustainability. We note not a single use—ecologically or otherwise—of the word *sustainable/sustainability* in any US accrediting commission that was studied. The couplet *climate change* was found twice, and *global warming* once—both in Europe. The acronym *SDG* was found three times. Most of the remaining words—*energy*, *PRME*, *carbon*, *footprint*, *planet*, and *waste*—were found only once and only in European contexts.

Admittedly reductive as it is, when using this word-search method as described to gauge the impact accreditation regimes have on HEI's motivation to engage with sustainability and the SDGs via, for example, the greening of curriculum, it certainly appears that institutional accreditation lacks explicit operational engagement with the human-generated climate crisis and imminent collapse of biodiversity. At least on paper, accreditation in higher education

appears both unable and unwilling to exercise significant influence over HEI's in their respective institutional responses to the Earth crisis. As has been seen, sustainability is absent, for example, within standards related to traditional notions of how ethics and integrity are to be demonstrated within higher education. The situation in the US, Africa, and among international and regional oversight bodies is even more egregious than in Europe. In short, engaging with sustainability gains HEI's little in terms of demonstrating compliance with existing standards when applying for institution accreditation and re-accreditation. However, to address the climate crisis seriously and to re-imagine the role colleges, universities, and business schools can and must play in leading societal transformation, HEI leaders require the support, guidance, and validation provided by accrediting and quality assurance agencies.

Accreditation Standards as Levers for Transformative Change in Higher Education

The influence accreditation regimes have upon institutional efforts to integrate sustainability into operational practice is demonstrated in one recent study of how European business schools responded to recent changes in accreditation standards vis-à-vis the concept of social impact (SI). Educators taking part in this study—noting that accreditation agencies in the field: i.e. AACSB (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), AMBA (Association of MBAs) and EQUIS (EFMD Quality Improvement System) have recently included measures of social impact in their accreditation criteria and certifications—affirm that such measures constitute a strong external driver of institutional change (Godonoga, 2023, Section 4.1, online). Such external pressures for change are mostly normative and coercive, driven by accreditation agencies, governments, and professional networks (such as PRME: Principles for Responsible Management Education), in that order.

All-in-all, findings show that pressures for SI assessment are both environment- and organisation-driven, and there are elements of a market and a state logic that support it. Externally, norms of accreditations and networks, as well as coercion by state laws and funding agencies are most prominent. Internally, leadership and organisational strategy play a major role. (Godonoga, 2023, Section 4.1, online)

A separate study (Godonoga, 2022) showed the importance of similar institutional pressures vis-à-vis the adoption of social responsibility (SR) practices in universities as another important aspect of institutional accountability and legitimacy.

Today, universities operate in an institutional environment that increasingly demands SR

and this includes generating benefits for a wider range of stakeholders. SR is increasingly called for in funding instruments (e.g., *Horizon Europe*), international accreditations (e.g. EQUIS: *The European Quality Improvement System*), global networks (e.g., The Talloires Network of Engaged Universities) and rankings (e.g. *THE Impact Rankings*). (Godonoga, 2022, p.445)

Examples of Effective Sustainability Indicators

What follows are examples of standards and indicators related to sustainability that demonstrate how accreditation agencies complement socially and ecologically engaged university missions by providing “incentives to recognize and reward not only excellent research and teaching but also commitment to SR” (Godonoga, 2022, p.459).

From EFMD-EQUIS (2023):

Summarize the School’s commitment to the global environmental protection agenda and any steps the School takes to monitor its carbon footprint and to decarbonize, including the use of digital technologies. (p.77)

From AMBA (2022):

Impact. 4.1 The institution should have a clearly articulated definition of impact, with an authentic and measurable analysis of the way in which the business school and its MBA portfolio make a positive contribution to the sustainable development of individuals, organizations, its immediate ecosystem and wider society. (p.20)

From NECHE—New England Commission of Higher Education (2021):

Information, Physical, and Technological Resources—7.23. Facilities are constructed and maintained in accordance with legal requirements to ensure access, safety, security, and a healthy environment with consideration for environmental and ecological concerns.

From AABS—Association of African Business Schools (2018):

8.1 Program portfolio—Describe how the programs provided contribute to sustainable development of the country and region.

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Around Sustainability

As we have seen, accreditation and quality assurance agencies electing to embrace sustainability as an indicator of quality education face a significant challenge: how to

imagine quality assurance standards that align to *Sustainable Development Goal 4.7* specifically and to the 17 SDGs generally. The several examples of accreditation standards and indicators presented above suggest how individual accrediting bodies are starting to take up this challenge. However, what is needed is a larger paradigm shift in the programmatic learning outcomes articulated by academic leadership across higher education—a shift that breaks with business-as-usual teaching and learning practices and commits to building sustainability literacy across the curriculum, campus, and community. To achieve this, a second and related paradigm shift is needed within accreditation and quality assurance—a shift that breaks with validating business-as-usual teaching and learning practices and commits to requiring HEI's to assess sustainability literacy and provide evidence that they are building sustainability knowledge as the key metric of a quality education. Meeting this challenge effectively and urgently is at the heart of the paradigm shift now laboring to take place across accreditation and quality assurance in tertiary education.

A recently developed process for such curricular review and revision, as well as a corresponding instrument for assessing sustainability knowledge, now provide both HEI's and accreditation bodies with practical tools to begin effecting this long-awaited paradigm shift. The Sulitest Impact organization has designed and developed an online tool—*TASK™* *The Assessment of Sustainability Knowledge* (Stough, 2025) to assess student sustainability knowledge as an incentive and support for articulating a new set of Earth-friendly learning outcomes, to drive corresponding curricular and pedagogical transformation, and to provide HEIs (and their accrediting bodies) with a means to measure and demonstrate meaningful institutional and societal impact (Decamps, 2017, 2021). *TASK™* is based upon insight and expertise gained since 2014 via the administration of its first assessment tool—the *Sulitest*—to some 350,000+ students across the globe (Mason, 2019). The new 2023 tool called *TASK™* is an online, 80-minute, 112-item, multiple-choice, psychometric test measuring the quantity and quality of knowledge about sustainability possessed by test-takers. *TASK™* issues a certificate to each participant that details the numerical scores and acts as a sustainability micro-credential.

Conclusion

Accreditation and quality assurance processes are potentially well-adapted to helping HEI's lead the transition to a sustainable future if both educational and quality assurance leadership embraces the importance, inevitability, and urgency of effecting a paradigm shift in the ethos and outcomes of higher education as described in this short essay. As indicated in the research literature, two particularly powerful leverage points present themselves.

First, the reform of accreditation standards requires that sustainability be embedded across all existing standards—not as a “stand-alone” sustainability standard or silo. A sustainable world requires a systemic and holistic approach. Stakeholders should embed sustainability thinking into all areas that accreditation normally evaluates, i.e., the vision-mission-values statement, student learning-development-achievement, instructional design-delivery-assessment, student support services, leadership-governance-administration, facilities-safety-maintenance, quality assurance-institutional effectiveness, and ethics-institutional integrity. Second, the accreditation profession must recognize that little will change without prescriptive standards and indicators. If ever there was a time in Earth history to be prescriptive in what constitutes good practice and quality in higher education, it is now. Just as our collective survival as a species requires that we prescribe to ourselves a very different way to think, to value, to be, and to behave, so too must accreditation professionals embrace the responsibility to speak and prescribe truth to the HEIs that educate our species. What HEI’s and accreditation bodies have been doing to date in terms of defining, delivering, and demonstrating “quality education” not only hasn’t worked; it is causing the very problems we face—a society driving over-consumption, systemic pollution, the destruction of nature, and the desecration of our beautiful and fragile blue-green home—planet Earth.

Finally, higher education professionals and their many quality assurance stakeholders must also act with conviction and urgency. H.G. Wells characterized civilization as a race between education and catastrophe. By revising and rewriting accreditation standards in line with the SDGs and the building of a sustainable and just society, accreditation professionals change the rules of the race in ways that favor the survival of civilization. That truly would be a quality education.

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