

TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND LOCAL PARTICULARITIES IN ESD POLICIES

POLAND

BETWEEN TOP-DOWN AND BOTTOM-UP

Universities in Poland find their own commitment to ESD in two ways: top-down and bottom-up. Top-down means activities related to **the university's development strategy** (ESD issue is mentioned, often indirectly), but participation in activities to benefit the university's social responsibility is emphasized (for example signing a declaration).

ESD activities are more often bottom-up, inspired by **the activities of students, teachers, researchers** or external stakeholders in universities.

Large public universities **establish structures** responsible for sustainable development at the university, including education for SD (SD Centers), and cooperate with the ministerial SD, ESD or SR (social responsibility of universities) working groups.

There is a **lack of research and debate on SD and ESD from a critical perspective**, and of practices sensitizing stakeholders to manipulation of ESD by academics/university management. ESD is urgently needed, especially critical ESD in collaboration with bottom-up initiators of activists for sustainability learning.



PORTUGAL

BETWEEN NORMATIVE OBSESSIONS AND STRATEGIC-POLITICAL DIFFICULTIES

In policy terms, the Portuguese state pursues the **implementation of SDGs according to the guidelines for Agenda 2030**. A majority of the documents are clear in this objective and seek the political mechanisms to better coordinate national efforts and evaluate the country's performance periodically. This produces **a web of policy-related documents** that affect various sectors of public administration.

There has been no articulated strategy on ESD but rather a **national strategy on Education for Development (ED)**. ED principles and strategy rely mostly on the connections between the public sector and the organized civil society sector. The national ED strategy seems to stress a cooperation between associations/ONGDs and schools, **leaving higher education out of this equation**.

There is no specific legislation for higher education concerning sustainability, in any of its various roles and functions, nor any kind of specific policy recommendations issued by the state toward the **implementation of SDGs in HE**. Although HEIs seem worried about the issue, their action seems to depend on the individual, **non-coordinated efforts of the academic** community members (namely teaching faculty members), and unified clear policies or plans to achieve SDGs are lacking (with the possible exception of the governance dimension).



SWEDEN

BETWEEN SYSTEMIC AFFIRMATION AND SCHOLARLY CONTESTATION

The Swedish policy on sustainability in higher education reflects an ambition to provide a **comprehensive approach to addressing sustainability challenges**. It focuses on integrating sustainability into all aspects of university operations (teaching, research and social outreach). However, the policy may also raise questions about the extent to which **critical perspectives and debates are encouraged** as many scholars refuse to be guided by the concepts of ESD and SD in an uncritical way.

By mandating the integration of sustainable development into all aspects of HE operations, the policy indirectly acknowledges **systemic issues causing unsustainability**. Agenda 2030 addresses **interconnected global challenges**, recognizing that issues like poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation are deeply rooted in systemic structures and require systemic solutions. Yet **debate here is not encouraged**, or even tamed by depoliticizing the discussion on the power-related issues around sustainable development as a concept.

The focus is more on **integrating sustainability into institutional practices** and promoting universities as agents of change, rather than directly **challenging the underlying systemic factors that contribute to unsustainability**. These elements are often obscured and erased in the process of promoting ESD, without reflecting on the **differences between individuals and global** actors, silently privatizing public concerns.



ITALY

BETWEEN LINEAR PERSPECTIVES AND POTENTIAL COMPLEXITY

Universities are asked to be active protagonists in ESD. All documents issued by national government bodies are aligned on this point. The university's role focuses mainly on the possibility of **disseminating a new culture and new ideas** that could enhance the realization of sustainable development. The idea of dissemination is not only based on an instructional model but also entails changes in educational processes and innovation in learning paradigms.

Another key role for universities is related to **third mission**, specifically in relation to multi-stakeholder projects aimed at developing territories. The potential role of HE in terms of scrutiny and critical thinking about the wider scenario and the assumptions underpinning the concept of ESD is absent. When universities are asked to assume a role of critical reflection, this task is limited to a "technical" evaluation of tools/instruments and mainly focused on an evaluation of performance (related to certain policies or interventions, etc.).

In fact, there is **no space for addressing sustainability as a contested concept**: its ambivalence and its potential for becoming a new buzzword or paradigm for governing subjects. In this sense, the potential in terms of critical thinking that universities may offer on this side is not at all considered. The role of universities in ESD is explicitly asked to be measured through rankings, introducing, in this way, a performance and competitive logic.



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