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Challenges for higher education and staff development towards sustainability: Empowerment of people and shaping of organizations

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Abstract

This article combines governance strategies and fields of activity to promote and facilitate sustainable change in higher education institutions. The role of individuals and small units as change agents receives special attention. We recommend the support of strategic thinking on all levels and the navigation of change with the help of easily accessible tools.

1 The challenge

Higher education institutions are increasingly held responsible by a global educational agenda for things which go far beyond their traditional tasks of fundamental research, employability promotion, knowledge transfer, application and humanistic acquirements. Ever since the proclamation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (SDG, UN A/Res 70/1, 2015), the UNESCO Roadmap for Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2014), as well as numerous national action plans (e.g. BMBF 2017), higher education has been urged to respond to global challenges across disciplines, border, and cultures. “Transforming our societies towards a better future” is the new maxim. Research in many fields is already responding to this call with significant collaborations, initiatives and results.

However, the demand for a far-reaching transformation of educational institutions and their re-adjustment, in order to tackle wicked global problems (Wals), also prompts a change in teaching and learning environments. How can and will educational development respond?

The outlines of what is required have already been drawn (UNESCO 2014). The new role of education for sustainable development includes an orientation towards the seventeen SDGs; access to education across all parts of society; education for holistic human development; the future-ready education of teachers; and the sustainability of educational institutions themselves. From this framework, key competencies have been derived to improve sustainability and world citizen education (Adomßent/Hoffman 2013; UNESCO 2017). They focus on the ability to shape the future, to think ahead, and to engage in self-motivated, critical

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learning (among other aspects). Dealing with unknown and unknowable problems, complexity, and changing dynamics are also major aspects of the future-ready graduate (Wals).

The hardest part of the whole endeavor seems to be to translate these noble but abstract goals into something that relates to our everyday learning, working and living world. We have to tackle the future here and now.

2 *Fields of activity*

In our experience, this is the major challenge for educational developers who are working on the operational levels within their institutions. The focus lies on how to tackle the practical problems we face in order to realize the ambitious agenda of shaping our learning to come. From our experience, we identify the following four major fields of activity and challenges (for similar conclusions on organizational development cf. March 2016, pp. 46, 71, 104; Senge 2006, pp. 449-453):

A. Empowerment of people: How can students and teachers be successfully empowered in order to understand, promote, educate on and live towards sustainability goals?

B. Shaping of organizations: How can formal structures, organizations or networks be nudged towards flexibility and acknowledgement of necessary change?

C. Shaping of narratives: How can the education of tomorrow and the need for change to achieve sustainability be framed by understandable and acceptable narratives?

D. Dealing with crisis and failure: How can we tackle and overcome obstacles and setbacks on our way for an education to come? What are good practices for solving problems and crisis?

3 *Government strategies in higher education*

If we want to facilitate and coordinate activities within the four fields outlined above, our possibilities are usually limited by our positions within or in relation to higher education institutions. This corresponds to a value-based concept of governance by Lothar Zechlin (2017). Strategies to develop and facilitate change are based on institutional settings and the position of change agents within them, as well as on their potential to facilitate change. **Four major governance strategies** are of interest to us (cf. also Figure 1):

- (1) Governance by **direct control**
- (2) Governance by **institutional goals**
- (3) Governance by **organizational units** and more or less formal committees
- (4) Governance by **individual initiatives** and single actors

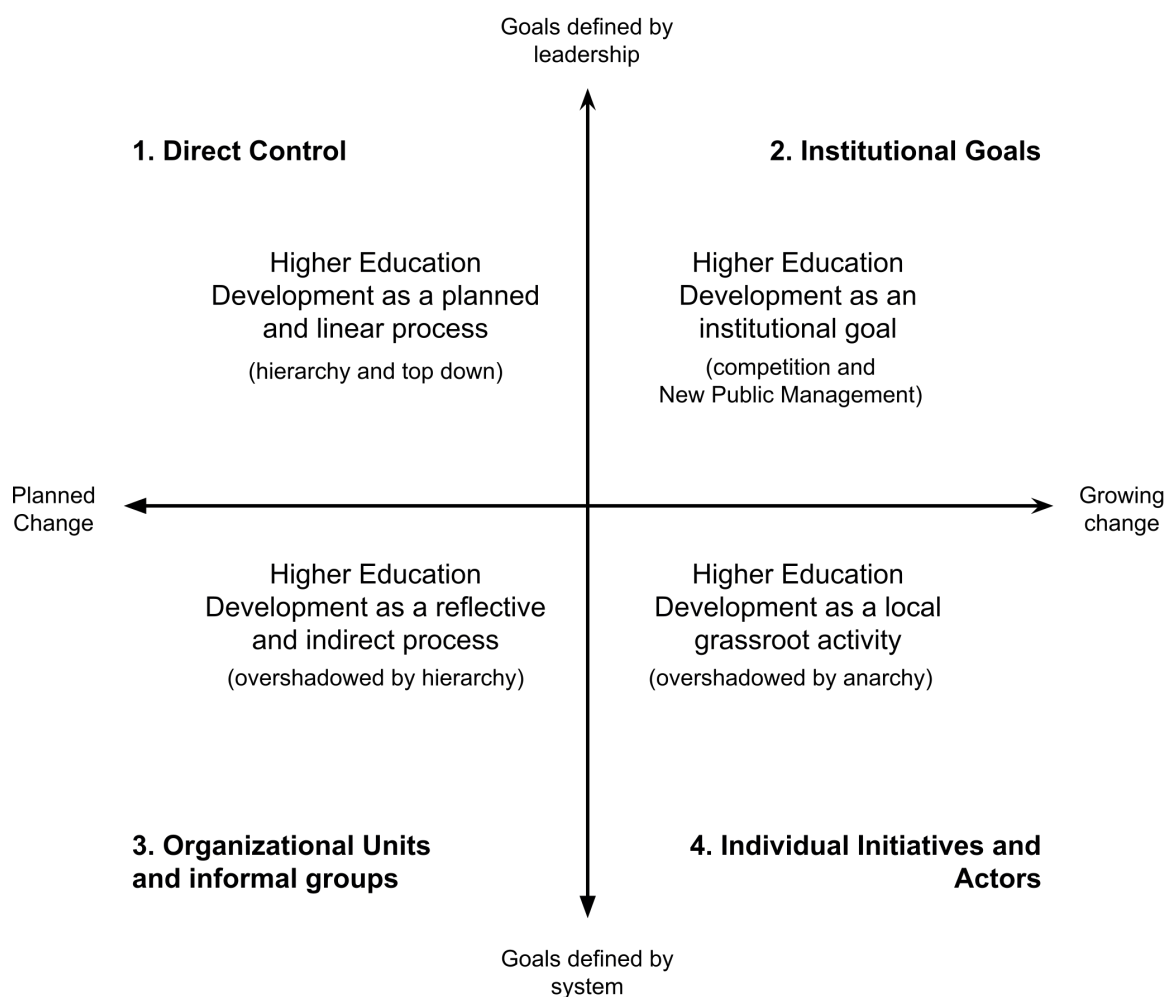


Figure 1: Governance model (Zechlin 2017) adapted for higher education development (HED)

If we combine the governance model with the fields of activity identified above, a wide range of actions can be identified. Depending on their position within the higher education (HE) institution, change agents and facilitators usually find their scope of influence limited at some point, but they also have unique possibilities within their range. Table 1 presents typical activities for different fields of action, grouped by the governance style available to change agents.

4 Navigating change

A successful change process within universities must ultimately pass through all four levels (1–4) in order to be implemented in a sustainable way (EUCEN 2009, pp. 6, 11). However, the starting point and the path followed are very different and must be carefully planned. If we take a look at how change is facilitated in HE, we can identify some possible ways of how to navigate governance strategy and activities towards a sustainable and future-ready education that has some lasting impact. Two examples:

1. A single department (3) decides to develop a common narrative (C) for its own field of work in order to reassure core members and collaborators about sustainable goals and measures. They start offering extra-curricular courses (A) (3) and then make their way through committees to accredit a course (A) (1). At the same time they recruit and educate partners (A) and start to build up a network with similar initiatives at other universities (D).

2. An individual (4) has developed strategies to deal with crisis and failure (D) on the basis of her long professional experience, which she has developed into models that she would now like to pass on. She contacts both the Vice-President for Continuing Education (1) and draws on a research project (3) with the aim of presenting her models and making them available to members of the university (A). A research project and publication will contribute to an ongoing, local and regional discussions on the topic.

	A) Empowerment of people	B) Shaping of organizations	C) Shaping of narratives	D) Dealing with crisis and failure
1) Direct governance	Promote and declare an agenda for sustainability Establish study courses on sustainability Offer continuing learning opportunities for staff, students and non-university groups	Create departments on sustainability Integrate sustainability in syllabi Connect your institution with regional, national and global actors	Connect local actions to global values and goals Promote a policy for social and global responsibility in higher education Facilitate a discourse on personal impact and meaning of sustainability issues	Establish a supportive discourse on sustainability Support resilience on organizational level Support a fair error culture and promote experiments
2) Governance by targets	Make sustainable development goals (SDG) a prime agenda Support local initiatives with funding and recognition	Include sustainability in goals and objectives on department level Recruit personnel with background and experience in sustainability	Include sustainability as prime requirement in funding initiatives Encourage application of sustainable thinking and action on local level	Include sustainability issues in quality development and evaluation Establish a critical review of expectations and achievements Establish indicators of success
3) Governance by less formal groups	Include sustainability in leadership programs and recruitment policy Recognize individual engagement and enthusiasm	Connect to other departments and units Make SDGs your goals on department level Facilitate cooperation between disciplines and cultures	Relate sustainability issues, goals, and actions to your organization Make activities visible for all and relate them to meaningful goals	Establish a resilient culture on individual level Establish a positive error culture Encourage group activities and shared responsibilities
4) Governance via individual initiatives and actors	Qualify and educate individuals Raise awareness of sustainability on personal level	Recognize individuals for their engagement Organize common interests and promote SDGs at your workplace	Share personal values, ideas, and experiences on local level Make good use of social media	Get professional, help, support or training Connect yourself to groups, networks or similar initiatives

Table 1: Example governance-activity matrix for facilitating change in higher education development

The processes described in these short scenarios are not arbitrary procedures but follow strategic ideas and goals:

- Sensitization on current issues and topics in higher education development and SDGs
- Connectivity to established ways of communication and organizational structures, thus respecting the local institutional culture
- Turning affected persons into empowered participants
- Aim for a broad discourse in order to gain traction and persistence
- Strengthening and qualification of individuals, teams and committees

5 Recommendations

These brief examples instruct us to facilitate and support strategic thinking on all institutional levels in order to open up windows of opportunity for sustainable change towards future-ready higher education.

Not only top-level management and heads of departments should be expected to take a strategic vantage point. By the model we introduced and the fields of activities we described, every individual and small unit within an institution is entitled to think and act strategically. Academics' autonomy remains a major feature even in times of context or policy change (Henkel 2005). Also, research on the role of microcultures in academic development has shown its potential for facilitating change through community building and networking (Mårtensson 2014, Mårtensson/Roxå 2008). Last but not least, academic developers have a great variety of backgrounds and attitudes (Land 2004). These findings offer a great resource for empowering change on a micro or meso level.

Most people in the HED community are by definition experts in empowerment, lifelong learning and reflective development. They have the experience, the means, and – most importantly – the possibility to act strategically. We have to spread awareness and encourage people to make use of easily accessible strategic tools to empower our colleagues to consciously navigate all levels of institutional change, whatever their starting point. We propose classical governance strategies and insights into learning organizations as helpful tools for further reflection and actions on behalf of the SDGs in university settings.

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