Change-Agents in Sustainability Governance

Institutional Transformation at Three Institutions of Higher Education

By:

Valentin Tappeser
Maastricht University Green Office
Sint Servaaskloster 32, 6211TE Maastricht
The Netherlands

and

Arian Meyer
Maastricht University Green Office
Sint Servaaskloster 32, 6211TE Maastricht
The Netherlands

Corresponding author: valentin@tappeser.com

Abstract

How do you get complex institutions like universities, with their special responsibility as drivers of education and research, to operate and educate sustainably for sustainable development? This paper investigates the role of students in institutional transformation at institutions of higher education in general and the establishment of sustainability governance structures in particular. To this end, three case studies are being investigated: Maastricht University, where a student initiative successfully transformed into a student-run university department managing the institution’s sustainability portfolio; the University of California Santa Cruz, where a broad coalition of students and staff members carry the university’s sustainability movement; and Leuphana University Lüneburg, where sustainability governance is pushed by the faculty in collaboration with higher management. Ethnographic research performed before and one year after the establishment of Maastricht University Green Office as a university department, as well as qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and drivers of the sustainability movement at UCSC (2010) and Leuphana University Lüneburg (2011) highlight the importance of students in instigating processes of transformation at institutions of higher education. As institutional entrepreneurs, they have the potential to drive sustainability
governance and effectively cope with the problem of embedded agency, if sufficiently empowered.

**Keywords:** sustainability governance, institutional theory, student impact, participation, transdisciplinarity
Introduction

The increasingly apparent deficiencies of our global societies and economies, in terms of the socio-economic and environmental consequences they produce, have made the need for sustainable development a widely acknowledged fact in government, businesses, and societal organizations. Yet, despite this realization, so far only little has been done to really operationalize this concern into systemic reform and institutional practice (Holt & Barkemeyer, 2012; McCool & Stankey, 2004). This is also the case for universities, which, as institutions of higher education, have a special responsibility in this regard, for they are not only role models for other public institutions but also creators of knowledge and educators of future decision-makers (Michelsen, Adomßent & Godemann, 2008; UNESCO, 1997; Wright, 2002).

Aiming to address an underrepresentation of the role of students in current literature on sustainability in higher education (Arbuthnott, 2009; Burki & Tappeser, 2010; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008), this paper seeks to answer the following question: How can student participation influence institutional structures and thereby sustainability governance at universities? Drawing on ethnographic research at Maastricht University (UM), the University of California Santa Cruz, and Leuphana University Lüneburg, it is being argued that students can play a pivotal role as potential change-agents and institutional entrepreneurs who, if sufficiently empowered, can provide an effective solution to the problem of embedded agency in a university context. Here the notion of tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007) is being invoked as a useful concept to understand this process of institutional change.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: The first section deals with the theoretical approach. The authors thereby pay specific attention to varying levels of deliberation and hierarchy in governance, as well as underlying conceptions of sustainability on the one hand (van Zeijl-Rozema, Cörvers, Kemp, & Martens, 2008) and on the other hand with agency-structure considerations in an institutional context (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007). Second, the methodology will be explained. Qualitative interviews with key stakeholders, tracing the development of sustainability governance structure at three different universities, were combined with literature research in the fields of sustainability studies, governance, and institutional theory. The third chapter examines the cases of the Universities of Maastricht, Santa Cruz, and Lüneburg. Fourth, the subsequent discussion will compare the cases and elucidate them by means of the
theoretical frameworks introduced in the second section. Finally, the paper concludes with the statement that deliberate student-driven approaches towards sustainability governance at universities seem to be an innovative and functioning concept that has already produced remarkable results. Whether it is a sustainable concept in itself, however, remains to be seen while providing interesting avenues for further research.

**Between Sustainability Governance and Change Agents – a theoretical approach**

*Sustainability Governance*

Van Zeijl-Rozema, Cörvers, Kemp and Martens (2008), developed a radically simplified model of different types of governance for sustainable development (SD) to make sense of the concept. They identified two major perspectives on sustainable development and two principal modes of governance as sensible distinctions categorizing a complex spectrum of approaches. This resulted in the 2x2 matrix of four idealized types of governance for SD as depicted in Figure 1.
On the horizontal axis, a distinction is made between the ecological sustainability perspective and the well-being perspective of sustainable development. The former, characterized by an understanding of SD as defined by scientifically determinable ecological boundaries (e.g. Hueting & Reijnders, 2004) allows for setting clear objectified goals that are easily measurable while neglecting complexities inherent in the interlinkage of environmental, societal and economic processes. The latter, in contrast, sees goals of SD as societally rather than physically determined, allowing for a multiplicity of goals to exist alongside each other, based on societal preferences subject to normativity and local interpretation (e.g. Brand & Karvonen, 2007; Gibson, Angolin, Lawrence, Robinson, Tansey & Watson, 2001; Mccool & Stankey, 2004).

The vertical axis has hierarchical and deliberate modes of governance as its idealized types or endpoints, which is based on a review of similar governance typifications distinguishing between hierarchical and self-governance (Kooiman, 2003), hierarchical and non-hierarchical coordination (Börzel, Guttenbrunner, & Seper, 2005), hierarchy and heterarchy (Smismans, 2008), and the likes. What comes out of this cross-section are the four idealized types of governance for SD, as depicted above: the ecological-hierarchical type, the ecological-deliberative type, the well-being-hierarchical type and the well-being deliberative type. While in the ecological perspective goal setting remains straightforward, deliberative governance allows for more diversity and experimentation in face of uncertainty with regards to the means to achieve these goals than a more hierarchical approach. In either case, however, a unidimensional viewpoint and focus on technological fixes potentially stands in the way of systemic reform. The well-being perspective on SD makes goal setting more difficult. Its socially constructed, interpretative, and normative character leads to a multiplicity of goals that, in the case of a hierarchical mode of governance may be boiled down to one consensus goal for the sake of implementation, while more deliberate forms allow multiple goals to exist alongside one another. Yet, while the former approach may lead to societal discontent and some level of inflexibility in face of uncertainty, the latter may hinder implementation for a lack of direction and decisiveness (van Zeijl-Rozema et al., 2008).

This typification and framework for analysis is used to provide a sense of direction in the discussion of sustainability governance structures in the three
universities that are the objects of investigation in this present study. While this framework has been developed with territorial entities in mind, such as regions, states, or supranational entities, it may be equally useful for institutions of higher education. As complex institutions with a variety of stakeholders, decentralized structures and various external relations and liabilities, university governance structures bear many resemblances to those of higher-level entities on regional or national level. However, there are also many elements of corporate governance and characteristics unique to the higher education sector that require some further consideration.

Institutional Entrepreneurship

Governance for sustainable development in institutions of higher education requires the commitment and persistence of individuals pushing for change in an institutionalized environment. With processes of institutionalization having been covered extensively in institutional theory in the past, the focus has increasingly shifted to processes of change as well as deinstitutionalization (Oliver, 1992). As Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) pointed out, this led to an increasing preoccupation with endogenous agents of change or, as DiMaggio (1988) calls it “institutional entrepreneurs” who work and push for the transformation of existing institutional structures and beliefs.

In the field of institutional theory, the agency structure problem manifests itself in the problem of embedded agency (e.g. Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Seo & Creed, 2002). Institutional entrepreneurs thus have to square the circle in a sense, for they need to be embedded enough to have the power to effect changes while at the same time remaining critical enough to have an interest in change and be able to imagine alternatives, the capacity for which is fundamentally constrained by the very idea of an institution. It has been suggested that competing institutional logics can create the space for innovation and agency for change. Being embedded in multiple institutional contexts, some individuals are exposed to the contradictions between an institutional logic and their own interests or identities shaped by schemata alien to that logic, which allows them to envision alternatives and become institutional entrepreneurs. Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) suggest the notion of tempered radicals as individuals who are affiliated with interest or identity based communities that are at odds with the dominant institutional logics of their organization, thus being predisposed to effectuate and push for change. Well-versed in the institutional structures and beliefs of their organization,
they are in a position to legitimize the questioning and transformation of institutional norms and practices if they manage to maintain their dual identities. By means of targeted framing, they can express goals in ways that enhance their legitimacy in the existing institutional logic and influence meaning-making.

Establishing sustainability governance structures at universities requires very similar processes of institutional change, and the notion of tempered radicals fits very well with the institutional entrepreneurs who instigated these changes at the institutions under investigation. Yet, the complex nature of sustainable development, with its multiple definitions and changing goals, complicates the picture and, as our case studies indicate, produces a more dynamic pattern of institutional change.

**Methodology**

The current study is based on qualitative research conducted between May 2010 and December 2011 at three different universities. The aforementioned theoretical frameworks derived from extensive literature research in the fields of sustainability studies, governance, entrepreneurship, organizational studies, and sustainability in higher education serve as useful tools to understand the generated data. While the sustainability governance model (van Zeijl-Rozema et al., 2008) allows for a comparison of the cases along the axes of hierarchy and deliberation on the one, and differing definitions of sustainable development on the other hand, the discussion of institutional entrepreneurship and tempered radicalism (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007) enables a discussion of agency-structure considerations in an institutional context. In combining in-depth research of three rather successful, yet, rather different institutions in terms of their sustainable development approaches with insights from institutional theory and sustainability governance, the authors hope to advance the theoretical depth of the debate on sustainability in higher education as well as to instigate a discussion on the role of students as potentially crucial agents of change in the transformation of universities.

A total of 18 in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders including university management, faculty, staff and students central to the establishment of sustainability governance structures at their respective institutions were conducted by the authors and serve as a basis for the study’s claims and propositions. All interviews were semi-
structured and between 30 and 60 minutes long. Interview guides with open-ended questions covered the development of the respective change initiatives, the change-agents and their impact on the institution as well as the two in relation to each other.

However, the research partially presented in this paper also faces some considerable limitations. While the theoretical framework used provides significant insights, it can only partially account for the richness of the data. Furthermore, the choice of three young, small to medium sized universities cannot be seen as representative for the entire university landscape. The same holds for the sampling of interviewees. Using a mixture of snowball and purposive sampling and an overall limited sample size a certain bias may arise. Lastly, the active involvement of the authors in one of the cases, while possibly enabling a more in-depth understanding of the case itself and the subject matter in general, may also have lent itself to some bias in the overall course of the research.

Case Studies

Maastricht University Green Office

Students started the Green Office as an initiative in 2010. It developed into a student-led university department that manages the university’s sustainability portfolio. Staffed by seven student employees and the environmental advisor of the university, it initiates and coordinates sustainability projects at UM, including the areas of education, research, operations, and the broader university community with the help of volunteers as well as a broad network of stakeholders within and outside the institution. In the first year of its existence (2010-2011), the Green Office conducted the first comprehensive baseline assessment on sustainability at UM (The Climate Action Report: Maastricht University, 2011) and implemented a major Green ICT project in collaboration with ICT-Services (Ctrl-Alt-Delete Emissions Project: Maastricht University Green Office, 2011) besides providing support to student initiatives and hosting a variety of events. Currently, the Green Office is busy with the development of the sustainability policy 2012-2014 as well as the monitoring and the development of implementation plans for UM.

The establishment of the Green Office as a student-driven bottom-up initiative and its endorsement by top-level management as a means to connect grassroots
innovators and institutional efforts to sustainable development “so that the ideas and enthusiasm of grassroots initiatives would also have an impact on the overall institutional behavior of the university” (A. Postema, Vice-President Maastricht University, personal communication, November 28th, 2011) was an attempt to really operationalize a more deliberative and pluralistic approach to SD within the institutional structures. The operationalization of this deliberative approach within a hierarchical structure seems to be working well so far, as students, administrators and faculty alike see the Green Office as a success story (U.Scharf, A.Zeijl-Rozema, A. Postema, H. Hospers, F.Spira, personal communication, 2011).

While an increasing professionalization and a pragmatic, result-driven approach of the team has been mentioned as a crucial success-factor by all interviewees, Green Office members, administration, and faculty alike see the participatory nature of the GO to be threatened by this logic. Caught in between the institution and the dynamic sprawl experienced in their student lives, the Green Office student employees have the potential to act as tempered radicals and institutional entrepreneurs (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007). Given a positive further development of the Green Office; as an institutionalized change-agent it would be unique, or, as Harm Hospers, Dean Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, claimed: “There is no other student-led, university funded organization that has goals about how to run this place and connects both students and other people working and the institution [...] I don’t know of any other example” (personal communication, October 19th 2011).

University of California Santa Cruz

Through a major campaigning effort, the California Student Sustainability Coalition (CSSC) triggered a system-wide policy on sustainable practices that was passed by the regents and subsequently the President of the University of California System, which besides UC Santa Cruz (UCSC) comprises nine other campuses throughout the state. This policy laid the ground for increasing administrative engagement on campus level and, through a joint effort of students and staff, the establishment of the Counsel for Sustainability and Stewardship in 2006 (A. Winslade, personal communication, November 2010). Today, the sustainability office has four full-time staff members, ten student employees and more than thirty interns who coordinate a broad range of
sustainability activities guided by the Campus Sustainability Plan (UCSC, 2011), which is a collaboratively developed strategy document for the years 2011-2013.

While formal governance structures are still very much hierarchical and intransparent, especially at the level of the regents, efforts to increase sustainable development below this level are very much driven by deliberative modes of governance. It thus seems that the deliberative nature of the process driving sustainability at UCSC is very much an achievement of the students themselves that, rather than being specifically endorsed by the administration, was achieved despite the relative inertia of hierarchical administrative bodies.

In either case, the University of California Santa Cruz is a role model of campus sustainability that, having won numerous awards in this domain (C. McDaniels, personal communication, November 2010.), successfully implemented an approach to sustainability governance between its ecological and well-being deliberate modes, as specified by van Zeijl-Rozema et al. (2008). The pivotal role of students in driving this process, who through dedicated training and support are apparently able to be effective change-agents and institutional entrepreneurs, is clearly visible in the case of UCSC. By alluding to a longstanding commitment to the environment and successfully reaching out to staff and administrators, they have been able to transform at least parts of their institutional culture to commit to the imperatives of sustainable development.

*Leuphana University* Lüneburg

The process of developing sustainability governance structures at the Leuphana University Lüneburg was strongly driven by faculty. With two major research projects on what sustainability means in a university context (“Agenda 21 and the University” as well as “Sustainable University”), they managed to integrate organizational concerns into the core of their work as researchers, thereby creating a space for active engagement in terms of time and resources, the effects of which would outlast the individual projects. By integrating sustainability into the domain of teaching and research, relatively little additional administrative structures were needed to operationalize sustainability, also on a campus operations level. Through their institutional legitimacy as high-ranking professors and members of the academic senate, the main change-agents were able to use existing hierarchical governance structures for systemic change towards
sustainability while opening up some means of deliberation, mainly within educational structures. Two administrative working groups, one on the environment and the other one on health, drawn from student, staff and faculty bodies as well as the environmental coordinator specifically hired to address environmental and sustainability issues, is what exists in terms of dedicated, formal structures specifically related to sustainable development on an administrative level. In charge of the environmental and health management systems as well as the sustainability report, they ensure progress monitoring and implementation processes. Yet, the majority of impetus for change comes from teaching and research, initially through the two research projects, but then also through project seminars in which students develop and implement their own ideas. Yet, while students participate extensively through educational projects as well as by setting up own initiatives implementing e.g. solar panels on some university buildings or organic food options at the mensa (M. Adomßent, personal communication, November 30th 2011), their involvement in university management and thus in the larger strategic or visionary questions remains limited.

While there seems to be consensus that the students are an important motor for change, identifying problems and “pegging away” (“Die lassen auch nicht locker”, M. Adomßent, personal communication, November 30th 2011) at trying to solve them, their attempts to constructively collaborate (“konstruktiv mitarbeiten”, J. Frey, personal communication, November 30th 2011) with university management in governance questions are barely successful or appreciated, or as Frey describes it: “participation yes, but on the very lowest level” (Ibid.). This observation is further supported in the book “Sustainable University” (Michelsen et al., 2008), presenting the outcomes of the second major research project on the issue mentioned above. Comparing student participation in Lüneburg with that of North American Universities, Michelsen et al. see more of an intrinsic motivation of the students in comparison with their American counterparts where such engagement is actively supported, thus leading to a situation where the potential of students in that regard is not fully put to use.

Discussion of the case studies

_In the light of Sustainability Governance_
The importance of student participation emerged as an overarching theme in the case studies. While in Maastricht as well as in Santa Cruz, students were the pivotal change-agents that started the whole process of establishing sustainability governance structures, in Lüneburg they were seen as “a very very crucial factor from the beginning” (“Ein ganz, ganz wichtiger Faktor von Anfang an” - M. Adomßent, personal communication, November 30th, 2011), acting as a driver of all kinds of initiatives but also as a catalyst for a broader movement among students, staff and administrators. Surprisingly, even though the importance and the need for more students as co-producers (McCulloch, 2009) or active participants in university governance is widely discussed in the literature of the field (e.g. Bergan, 2003; Zuo & Ratsoy, 1999), and of stakeholder involvement in sustainable development, a well-known imperative (Coenen, Huitema, & O'Toole, 1998), the role of students in sustainability in higher education literature is often marginalized. Rather than as an active participant in the shaping of policies, the student is often theorized as an object that needs to be changed in order to become sustainable (e.g. Arbuthnott, 2009; Stubbs & Cocklin, 2008). The data from the three cases in this study clearly tells us otherwise. In fact, students may be key in the process of making university structures more open to organizational learning as an imperative of sustainable development (Michelsen et al., 2008).

As Institutional Entrepreneurs

The success of the respective change-agents in Maastricht, Santa Cruz and Lüneburg significantly relied and continues to rely on the various entry points for instigating change that could be leveraged within the existing institutional logics. By understanding sustainability challenges through the institutional culture the change-agents are at least partially embedded in, as well as through strategically framing these issues in terms compatible with this logic, they leveraged support and drew on existing resources to accomplish their goals (Benford & Snow, 2000). As a result of this, the emerging cultures of sustainability at the different campuses are clearly defined by the preexisting cultures, norms and values of their local context. A focus on learning, innovation, critical thinking, and especially student-to-student teaching embodied in Maastricht’s university-wide problem based learning approach enabled the envisioning as well as the adoption by university management of a concept like the Green Office. Long standing traditions in
environmental stewardship and student activism at UCSC allowed for the development of its vibrant, environmentally focused sustainability movement, and Lüneburg, with its history in teacher’s education and cultural studies, made the self-reflective research effort that lead to its impressive transformation possible.

The empirical evidence and the discussion above clearly suggest that every case study can be allocated to one of the fields of the 2x2 matrix describing governance of sustainable development. The case studies share one common theme, namely the involvement of students and thus their influence on institutional structures and consequently on sustainability governance at the respective university. Maastricht University Green Office can be allocated to the lower right corner, featuring a deliberative approach and focusing on well-being. UCSC’s characteristics suggest an allocation to the lower left corner due to its focus on ecological issues while being mostly deliberative in its sustainability governance structures. The Leuphana University Lüneburg, is to be located more towards the upper right corner as the approach was driven by faculty, exhibiting a more hierarchical approach with a focus on well-being.

Due to the fact that students (or students and staff) had an influence on the alteration of the given institutional structure in the three cases, an element of institutional entrepreneurship becomes evident in all cases. If one combines both theoretical frameworks, the Maastricht University Green Office, albeit representing the youngest and therefore least developed approach to sustainability governance in the current study, comes closest to the, at least in theory, most ideal situation. The UMGO exhibits both features of being student-driven (deliberative), and a focus on well-being (addressing various societal relevant issues) while being embedded into the university structure. Through involvement in various institutional contexts, the students in the Green Office, as tempered radicals of sorts, can be effective institutional entrepreneurs, able to challenge the institutional logics of the university.

However, it remains to be seen whether the position and effectiveness of the Green Office as an institutionalized change agent can be sustained over revolving generations of students over time.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the examination of the development of sustainability governance
structures at the universities of Maastricht, Santa Cruz and Lüneburg strongly suggests that students can and should play a pivotal role in this process. Engaged faculty that is able to direct its research onto the question of sustainability in the university itself, as a transdisciplinary endeavor using the own institution as a space of experimentation as in the case of Lüneburg, probably represents the most effective type of change-agent, yet this can only ever be a minority approach of a few small institutions with a strong sustainability focus. While a lot can be learned from Lüneburg’s successes, it apparently fails to give students a sense of empowerment in (sustainability) policy questions, leading to a perception of green washing from the side of the university board, which underlines the importance of participation in higher education sustainability governance as an underrepresented issue in the current literature.

The cases of Santa Cruz and Maastricht demonstrate the power of students in this matter. In Santa Cruz, students have built strong and independent organizational structures in order to be able to influence and to work with administrative structures. In Maastricht, students have been able to establish themselves at the very core of sustainability policy making. While the former system already proved its functionality, at least regarding environmental concerns, the latter will have to stand the test of time to prove its effectiveness in the long run. If it does, Maastricht University Green Office could truly be a model for tempered radicalism institutionalized as a way to overcome the problem of embedded agency in the university context, providing a new level of participation and empowerment.

The further development of these cases and especially Maastricht University Green Office provides a highly interesting avenue for further research, especially regarding the question of embedded agency and institutional entrepreneurship, as does the linkage between pre-existing institutional logics and emerging sustainability cultures at universities observed in the present cases. Furthermore, with all three universities exhibiting a tension between hierarchical and deliberate modes of governance at different stages of the continuum, a more detailed analysis and further mapping of university sustainability governance approaches within the framework proposed by van Zeijl-Rozema et al. (2008), could provide significant further insight and means of comparison.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Valentin Tappeser
Valentin Tappeser is a recent graduate of University College Maastricht with a Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2012. His research interest lies in inter disciplinary studies at the interface of humanities and social sciences. In particular Mr. Tappeser is interested in sustainability studies, sociology and political philosophy. Next to his studies, Mr. Tappeser involves himself in a plethora of projects dealing with local student initiatives, art and music projects. He was one of the founding members of the Maastricht University Green Office before he could deepen his knowledge of applied sustainability governance in Santa Cruz, where he spent a semester as part of his studies. In the future, Mr. Tappeser will follow the Global Studies Programme, a social science research masters programme at the Universities of Freiburg, Buenos Aires and Delhi, where he intends to do further research on grass roots sustainability initiatives around the globe.

Arian Meyer
Arian Meyer graduated with the Bachelor of Arts in European Studies from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences in 2011. Currently, he is following the Master of Arts in Analyzing Europe at the University of Maastricht. His main research interests are to be found in the European Union in general and in organizational theory in particular. At the moment he is working on the issue of the principal-agent relationship between the EU and its agencies. During his Bachelor studies, he has spent one semester at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques (Sciences Po) Paris. Mr. Meyer has also been involved since an early date in the construction of the Maastricht University Green Office in the position as Student Coordinator. His interest in sustainability studies stems from the theoretical-strategic angle.