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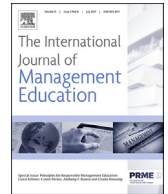
Sulitest: A collaborative initiative to support and assess sustainability literacy in higher education

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A B S T R A C T

This paper highlights the contribution of the Sulitest (the Sustainability Literacy Test) to the global agenda of integrating sustainability into higher education. The Sustainability Literacy Test is an open online training and assessment tool developed as an international collaborative initiative, in the context of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). This paper discusses how the tool works and emphasizes two major contributions: firstly, drawing a snapshot in the measurement of Sustainability Literacy worldwide at the present time, and secondly, providing an open tool to raise awareness on sustainability. The Sulitest enables higher education institutions (HEI's) to assess that they are producing sustainability literate graduates and to engage multiple stakeholders in accelerating the integration of sustainability in higher education standards and beyond.

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1. Introduction

Building a sustainable future is intertwined with education. A major role of education is to empower individuals and future decision-makers so that they are able to face the complex and key challenges of the 21st century, including enabling change and collectively building a sustainable future. Higher education has a particular role to play in this agenda in educating and creating change agents. While we celebrate the first decade of the UN Global Compact's Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) less than a year after the launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (setting-up the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development), the relationship between higher education and sustainability is more crucial than ever. This is highlighted specifically in SDG 4 on Quality Education.

Although, sustainability has impacted higher education in many ways, a major turning point occurred during the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development with the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI). For the first time in the context of UN initiatives, HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) acknowledged the responsibility that they bear in the pursuit of a sustainable future and agreed to act collectively and share their practices in a major voluntary contribution. Integrating

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sustainability in higher education refers to a broad scope of initiatives including pedagogy and learning, academic research, campus management, practices and impact as an organization. From this starting point, a key issue quickly emerged: how can the many stakeholders in the field of higher education who are willing to engage and share initiatives promoting sustainability, assess their impact? In order to support, develop or improve these practices, being able to monitor their impact is crucial. One of the major objectives of sustainability integration in higher education is to provide future graduates with sufficient knowledge and skills to face global challenges and conduct change toward a sustainable future. How can higher education institutions be sure that they achieve this objective and produce sustainability literate graduates?

This paper focuses on the Sulitest, an open online tool developed to achieve this objective. The Sulitest is based on a very simple idea: for a sustainable future, we need a world full of people with sustainability awareness and core literacy. Nowadays, a proof of a minimum level of English is required from candidates applying for admission to a university or for a job in international companies with a score on TOEFL, TOEIC or GMAT. Other higher education institutions verify applicants' standardized test scores in key skills areas for entering competitive MBA and Master's programs. With the growing importance of the sustainability agenda, the best organizations will require that their students, staff and faculty possess a basic understanding of the current global challenges and their responsibility in resolving them. The Sustainability Literacy Test (Sulitest) is a tangible implementation of HESI designed to help HEIs, companies and other organizations ensure that their graduates/employees are aware of and have core knowledge about these critical issues.

Sulitest is presented as a common good for the education community, available for any higher education institution in any field, and for students from all levels (Bachelors, Masters, MBAs, PhD). It is also now being made available to other stakeholders beyond academia. Functioning in a collaborative way, the tool is designed by and for its community with more than 300 volunteers from UN agencies, academic networks and universities from various countries. This community has actively contributed to the development and dissemination of the tool, and is beginning to make it a standard in raising awareness on sustainability issues and assess Sustainability Literacy. After a pilot phase (2014–2016) and allowing for feedback to be collected from the community, a new version of the Sulitest was launched in September 2016 with many improvements. As of February 2017, 553 universities and organizations from 57 countries have registered to use the Sulitest and 55 627 candidates have already taken the test. This makes it a powerful tool to engage individuals and organizations on the path to sustainability and provides an interesting database to map the current state of Sustainability Literacy and monitor progress over time.

This paper is structured in the following way: after this introduction, Section 2 presents the institutional background of sustainability in higher education. This includes the evolution of the UN agenda and the academic background that identifies the key sustainability learning outcomes that supports the idea of assessing impact. Section 3 details the Sulitest as a collaborative open online platform to contribute to this objective by improving and assessing Sustainability Literacy. Section 4 highlights two main contributions of the Sulitest to the global agenda with a first snapshot of current Sustainability Literacy worldwide and two case-studies of implementation in PRME institutions. Section 5 presents the conclusions and limitations of the study.

2. Background: sustainability in higher education

2.1. The UN agenda and the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME)

Education has played a central role in UN initiatives since the creation of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) less than a month after the official launch of the United Nations in October 1945. UNESCO's mission is; to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information.[1]

The Brundtland Commission's report in 1987 reaffirmed the importance of educating young people to build, "a development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland, 1987).

In 2004 the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD) called for action on the critical relationship between education and sustainable development[2] (ESD). The rationale of the DESD can be summarized as follows;

> "The principle of using education — formal, non-formal and informal — as an effective vector to bring about change in values, attitudes and lifestyles to ensure a sustainable future for sustainability and, consequently, for sustainable development. The DESD strives to achieve these results through the following objectives: facilitate networking, linkages, exchange and interaction among stakeholders in ESD; foster an increased quality of teaching and learning in education for sustainable development; help countries make progress towards and attain the Millennium Development Goals through ESD efforts; and provide countries with new opportunities to incorporate ESD into education reform efforts" (UNESCO, 2007).