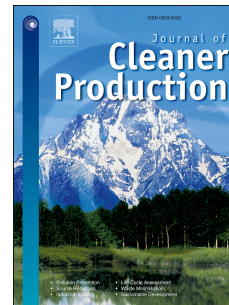


Accepted Manuscript

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PII: S0959-6526(16)31147-7

DOI: [10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.08.022](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.08.022)

Reference: JCLP 7814

To appear in: *Journal of Cleaner Production*

Received Date: 13 July 2015

Revised Date: 20 July 2016

Accepted Date: 4 August 2016

Please cite this article as: Dlouhá J, Glavič P, Barton A, Higher education in Central European countries – Critical factors for sustainability transition, *Journal of Cleaner Production* (2016), doi: 10.1016/j.jclepro.2016.08.022.

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Higher education in Central European countries – critical factors for sustainability transition

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Abstract

Despite the progress made toward incorporating sustainability concerns into the curricula and management of higher education institutions around the world during the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005–2014, progress has been sluggish in the former socialist states of Central Europe. A question has been raised in this article about the specifics of this region where the situation in six of these countries (Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia) was explored. To characterize sustainability changes in higher education institutions and develop a comparative overview of leading concepts, the ‘conceptual framework analysis’ qualitative method was used. A review and critical reflection of the current situation in the countries in question provided insight into commonalities or differences at national level and overall trends in the region; this information was structured, categorized, interpreted and embedded in a theoretically underpinned framework. On this basis, ‘critical transition factors’ were identified which helped to understand sustainable development policies at the higher education level, the driving forces behind institutional changes, and ongoing processes and their outcomes in the observed countries. These factors show a temporal hierarchy representing various stages of transition from environmental awareness to an understanding of the ambiguous term ‘education for sustainable development’, and more pragmatic approach where education is closely linked to green campus initiatives. The explored countries have mostly reached the lower transition stages. Constructivist, transdisciplinary approaches that underpin a focus on competences as a practical pre-requisite of democratic, sustainability oriented teaching, is greatly lacking in the region. The transition factors can be treated as concepts in the authors’ explanatory framework which is adjusted to each national context; its relevance for ESD transition processes can be generalised beyond the countries described in this article.

Key words: Higher education; Central Europe; transformation; education for sustainable development; critical factors; competences

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