
Which sustainable university are we actually talking about?

Exploring different discourses on the university in relation to sustainable development.

Proposal Higher Education Summit 2022

Universities and higher education are considered to be a crucial actor in society's strive towards sustainable development. In order to engage with sustainable development, universities are thus expected to undergo a transformation (cf. the call of this conference). However, in the academic literature on the university-sustainability nexus the desired end goal of such a transformation (what is often called "the sustainable university") and the underlying understandings of what a university actually is or should be are often implicit and undertheorized. In order to advance our understanding of the university's role in relation to sustainable development, it is of great importance to first understand how the university appears in the current academic literature about the university-sustainability nexus, that is: how is the sustainable university conceptualized in academic literature?

In order to answer this research question, the study combines systematic literature review approaches, the discourse theoretical framework and topic modelling as data-mining technique. 4585 academic publications that deal with the university and sustainability were collected and prepared for topic modelling. In a next step, the automated content analysis method topic modelling was used to find topics. Topics are collections of words that have a high probability of co-occurrence in documents in the corpus. Topic modelling results in a topic model: a list of topics (with every topic consisting of a list of the most important words in that topic) that represents the corpus. For this study, a topic model consisting of 250 topics was run. While the topic model gives a representation of the 'aboutness' of the corpus, it is not the end point of the study. The topic model was subsequently analyzed in three steps: (1) an inductive analysis of the topics, (2) finding clusters in the topic model through using sensitizing concepts, and (3) discerning similarities and differences within and between the clusters, in order to identify different coherent discourses on the university in relation to sustainability. Three discourses are identified in this way: "the sustainable higher education institution", "the engaged community", and "the green tech campus".

In this research lab, I wish to put the three discourses on "the sustainable university" on the table as a starting point of the discussion. The goal of the discussion would be to explore the implications of these three discourses regarding the framing of sustainable development, the understanding of what a university is or should be, and what happens in practice. To finalize the discussion, I would also like to explore alternative discourses on the sustainable university, in addition to the three identified in the literature.

Key references

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