

Bamboo straws? How cool (or not)!? Let's brainstorm to move beyond symbols in integrating sustainability in higher education

Aim of our workshop

While the discussion on sustainability action in higher education seems to be coming of age now, well-intentioned actions with little or no transformative impact too often still dominate the debate, especially when sustainability activists are reaching out beyond the safe space of 'the converted'. We are in need of ubiquitous and thoughtful sustainability actions, supported or triggered by higher education stakeholders. Building on the experiences we had at the Open Universiteit, we aim at co-identifying possible (and seemingly impossible!) actions that can foster sustainability in education, research, outreach and societal service.

Didactic approach of our workshop

We will focus on collaboratively identifying actions, through a structured group discussion, which will foster organizational learning within higher education institutions (and beyond). We will bring in some of our successes, -and ongoing struggles in 'realizing' sustainability (e.g. making our curricula more sustainable, proposing sustainability criteria for research(ers), sharing insights in a collaborative way in a competitive academic environment, integrating sustainability in actions kick-started by higher education etc.)

How will our workshop proceed?

We will use the 'Nominal Group Technique' (NGT). This uninviting term (sorry..) actually covers a fun way to co-create, to structure a group discussion and to generate a list of priorities. It consists of a series of individual reflection, group discussion and voting stages, and generates a prioritized list of actions, and recommendations. We aim to have people vote on 'quick wins' ('can do', feasible actions) and on 'moonshots' (actions which may seem impossible until someone actually tries) for sustainability in higher education. We believe it's a fitting method for an 'action atelier'. Next to being engaging and action-oriented, NGT has also been designed in order to maximize the advantages of a group discussion (such as knowledge exchange), and to minimize biases such as the dominance effect or the halo effect. We will facilitate the discussion, building on our previous experience with NGT facilitation.

Why we think our workshop has the potential for transformation?

We believe that a cross-disciplinary, cross-institutional approach, which explicitly aims at identifying 'quick wins' and 'moonshots' for making sustainability happen in higher education institutions, will not only be a great brainstorm, but also provide a 'buffet' from which higher education institutions and their stakeholders (that's basically every sustainability-craving person in society) can cherry-pick the actions they want to help realize.

