

## Students as bridge builders between science and society (Lilian Julia Trechsel)

*How can higher education institutions foster students' engagement in the science-society dialogue and at the same time benefit from their learning experiences for pushing the sustainability agenda forward?*

This research question drove us as a research team to explore how the learning experiences of student project leaders can help to foster the science-society dialogue, as this is essential for higher education institutions if they are to contribute to sustainable development in an effective way (Hay et al, 2019). We conducted 13 in-depth interviews with students who had been awarded funding for a sustainability project they proposed to conduct at their higher education institution, with involvement of other societal actors. We asked these students about their learning experiences as project leaders and crossers of boundaries between science and society. We considered the context of their projects as “ecologies of learning” with five learning dimensions: “learning to know, to do, to be, to care, and to transform” (Wals, 2020). In our conceptual framework for advancing the integration of sustainability in higher education, Wals’ “sustainability-oriented ecologies of learning” were complemented by Sterling’s model of how such environments that serve sustainable development in HEIs can be pursued at different levels of engagement: either as “accommodation”, or in a “reformative” way – or using a fully “transformative” path (Sterling, 2021). The transformative path requires adopting a whole institution approach. We will present one of the results of our analysis: a table of the students’ learning experiences ordered according to the degree of sustainability engagement at higher education institutions (HEIs). We’d like to explore with participants whether this table can be operationalized, and discuss what the next step might be and how HEIs might include the valuable learning experiences of students.

Moreover, we suggest comparing the results of our study in Switzerland with results from elsewhere: do you also have experience with students working in a semi-formal setting? In particular: are you such a student or would like to be one? Are you interested in supporting such settings or further analysis of students’ learnings within an “ecology of learning” framework? Let us join forces to explore how to mainstream sustainability at our HEIs and push the whole-institution approach further.

If we have time, we will also briefly portray the activities of a growing student network in Bern, Switzerland: their project, “Psst! - Platform for Students towards Sustainability”, includes three different types of higher education intuitions (university, applied science and pedagogical university) in one network.

### References:

- HAY, R., EAGLE, L., SALEEM MUHAMMAD, A., VANDOMMELE, L. & LI, S. 2019. Student perceptions and trust of sustainability information. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 20, 726-746.
- PSST! – Platform for Students towards Sustainability, information available [here](#).
- STERLING, S. 2021. Educating for the future we want. *GTI Forum Opening Essay*. Cambridge: Tellus Institute.
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