Proceedings of the 5th International Conference on Environmental Science and Applications (ICESA 2024)
Lisbon, Portugal- November 18 - 20, 2024
Paper No. 107
DOI: 10.11159/icesa24.107

Sustainability in Higher Education Institutions: The Key Role of Eco-Schools

Sara Sousa[1]
[1]Polytechnic University of Coimbra, Coimbra Business School|ISCAC & CERNAS, Bencanta, 3045-601 Coimbra, Portugal.
ssousa@iscac.pt

Extended Abstract

Since the second half of the last century, environmental problems began to generate deep concern around the world, not only among ordinary citizens, but also among political decision-makers [1]. The multiple adverse impacts of human's persistent and irresponsible actions, namely pollution, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, deforestation, and climate change, are increasingly evident, affecting deeply ecological systems and humans` wellbeing [2-4]. Climate change is particularly worrying, having become one of the main threats to the existence of life on planet Earth [5]. Faced with this increasingly unsustainable humanity's environmental footprint, governments, organizations, and civil society must act now and adopt effective measures to mitigate environmental problems and promote a sustainable development. As underlined by the United Nations [6], to create a better future for all, whether in this generation or the next, it is crucial a collective action to address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, environmental degradation and pollution.

In this context, it is vital that education takes an active role in promoting sustainability, being an essential tool for developing students' awareness of their attitudes and behaviours towards the environment [7]. Among the different current educational programs in the environmental area, the Eco-Schools stand out, one of the largest global sustainable school programs that plays a key role in applying the concepts of environmental education and management in the daily lives of schools. The Eco-Schools program continues to grow with the constant and ambitious mission of improving literacy and changing environmental behaviours, particularly among the youngest who are now students, but will be the future decision-makers, politicians, managers, teachers and parents. Therefore, it is essential to involve this younger generation in building not only a school, but also a more sustainable community [1, 8]. This study proposes to reflect on the importance of the Eco-Schools program, carrying out a critical analysis of the main guidelines, methods and areas of activity of the Eco-Schools. This research focuses on the reality of Portugal, an European country where the Eco-Schools program has been developed since 1996 by the Blue Flag European Association, an association that operates in all dimensions of sustainability, highlighting the importance to educate and involve all individuals in the community in joint actions towards a more sustainable society. The case study is a Portuguese public Higher Education Institution (HEI) awarded the Green Flag in the area of management and accounting. A description, analysis, and reflections are made on some of the main measures implemented within the scope of the Eco-Schools program, noting that, despite some implementation difficulties, the program was successfully developed, involving the participation of the entire school community, namely students, teachers, staff, and outside school community members, thus contributing to a more sustainable society.

Keywords: Eco-Schools Program; Higher Education Institutions; Sustainability.

References

[1] Sousa, S. "Some Reflections on the Role of the Eco-Schools Program in the Promotion of Sustainable HEIs: A Case Study in Portugal". *Administrative Sciences* 12: 149, 2022. https://doi.org/10.3390/ admsci12040149

[2] UNEP. *Sustainable Consumption and Production: A Handbook for Policy Makers.* United Nations Environment Programme, 2015. Available online: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1951Sustainable%20Consumption.pdf (accessed on 27 February 2024).

[3] Ye, Bin, Xiaolei Zhang, Xiaoling Zhang, and Chunmiao Zheng. “Climate change, environmental impact, and human health”. *Environmental Geochemistry and Health* 42: 715–17, 2020.
[4] IPCC. “Summary for Policymakers. In Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis”. *Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, 2021. Geneva: IPCC, p. 32. Available online: https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/downloads/report/IPCC_AR6_WGI_SPM_final.pdf (accessed on 21 February 2024).
[5] Shivanna K. R. “Climate change and its impact on biodiversity and human welfare”. *Proceedings of the Indian National Science Academy. Part A, Physical Sciences*, 88(2), 160–171, 2022. https://doi.org/10.1007/s43538-022-00073-6
[6] UN. “As Humanity’s Environment Footprint Becomes Increasingly Unsustainable, Global Leaders Recommit to Joint Climate Action, at Opening of Stockholm Summit”. *Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, Stockholm+50, Plenary, 1st and 2nd Meetings, ENV/DEV/2046*, June 2, 2022. Available online: https://press.un.org/en/2022/envdev2046.doc.htm (accessed on 21 February 2024).
[7] Yli-Panula, E.; Jeronen, E.; Mäki, S. “School Culture Promoting Sustainability in Student Teachers’ Views”. *Sustainability* 2022, 14, 7440. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14127440
[8] FEE. “Engaging the Youth of Today to Protect the Planet of Tomorrow”. *Foundation for Environmental Education*, 2024. Available online: https://www.ecoschools.global/ (accessed on 27 February 2024).