

Canadian Campuses: Assessing Sustainability Policy and Planning in STARS-rated Campuses



STARS - Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System (STARS), is a program of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) and is an assessment tool used to measure indicators of campus sustainability. Campuses that have completed STARS have made a commitment to engaging with sustainability, with sustainability policies and plans as key tools used to institutionalize sustainability. Over 40% of STARS campuses are large research universities. They are all English language institutions.

Sustainability plans tend to be designed from a bottom-up collaborative process; but lack top-down accountabilities.
Sustainability policies and plans emphasize facilities and community outreach goals, over academic, diversity, and investment goals.

These are two key findings from research conducted by the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN), which analyzed campus sustainability policy and plan documents from STARS-rated higher education institutions in Canada.

There are 21 STARS-rated colleges and universities in Canada.

SEPN analyzed the content of their sustainability policies and plans focusing on:

1. Quality of the plan documents using known indicators
2. Campus sustainability goals outlined in the documents
3. Conceptualizations of sustainability used in the documents
4. Conceptualizations of campus sustainability used in the documents

- 14 STARS campuses had a sustainability policy**
- 14 STARS campuses had a sustainability plan**
- 10 STARS campuses had a policy and a plan**

Concepts of Sustainability in the Policies

Most documents used a conceptualization of sustainability, while a few documents used only an environmental conceptualization. 79% of sustainability conceptualizations included the three pillars model (environment, economy, and society); 50% included the Brundtland definition – understanding sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations;” and 65% used environmental conceptualizations that included environmental protection, stewardship, or environmental sustainability.

Sustainability Goals Outlined in the Policies and Plans

An analysis of the sustainability goals within the documents found that facilities and community outreach goals were the most prevalent, although goals in operations and facilities, education, research, community outreach, and planning domains were also included in most documents. Both plans and policies emphasized facilities themes, in particular waste, buildings, and procurement (Figure 1). Emissions, transportation, and food themes were more prevalent in the plans than in the policy texts.

While the policies included research and education goals, very little detail was provided on how these would be implemented. Although fewer plans had research goals than the policies, those that did have research goals provided details on how to implement them, including providing funding and other resources to support sustainability research. Education goals were mainly described as both integrating sustainability into the curriculum and in after-class activities such as orientation programming, as well as sustainability awareness campaigns for all campus community members.

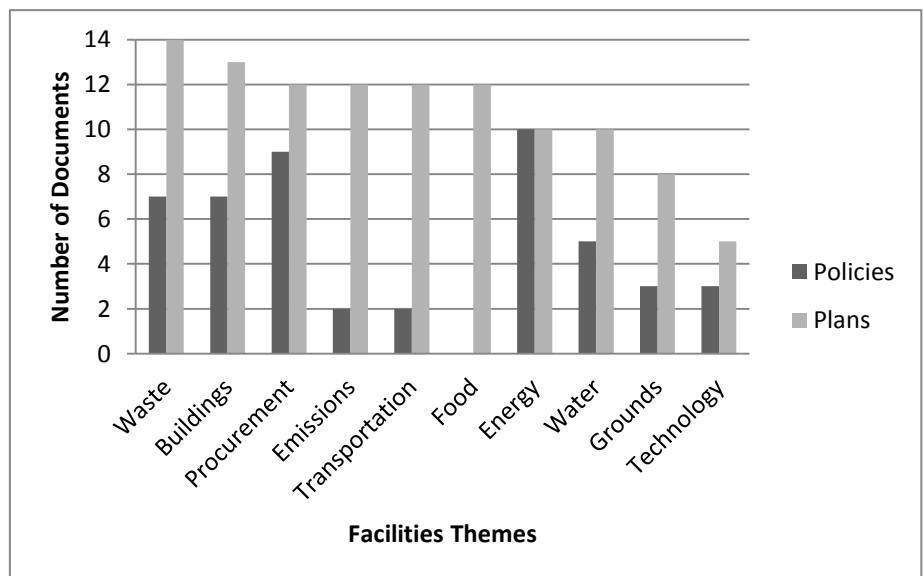


Figure 1. Facilities themes seen in the policy and plan documents.

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Most documents outlined goals to engage with members of the campus community and the general public, as well as government, businesses, and NGOs less frequently. Both policies and plans aimed to create partnerships, collaborate, and/or communicate; although in different quantities in policies and plans.

Goals related to the domains of accessibility, diversity, health and safety, and general finance and investments were only present in a few of the documents. Economic goals were divided into two themes; one aiming to ensure funding for sustainability projects, and the other aiming to ensure financial sustainability of institutions into the future.

Most documents outlined the creation of reporting processes to review sustainability progress over time, and the creation of specific policies on sustainability topics; however, integrating sustainability into general planning of the institution to ensure a cohesive policy vision was rarely seen. The role of staff devoted to sustainability on campus (sustainability director, office, or multi-stakeholder committee) was discussed within some of the documents.

Policy Quality

The research literature and the STARS program both suggest that campus sustainability should include all aspects of campus life (sustainability in teaching, research, operations, and community engagement). Most policy documents (64%) reflected this perspective. However, the intention of the sustainability policies was different from specific policy goals that were included. As described above, policy and plan goals focused on facilities and community engagement themes, while teaching and research themes were less prevalent.

Most of the STARS-rated policies (86%) identified their institutions as sustainability leaders. Some documents describe this leadership in terms of a moral responsibility to lead society as a public institution, while others describe this as their institution being the best at sustainability.

Plan Quality

The majority of plans (85%) described a bottom-up collaborative planning process that included surveys, focus groups, interviews, and web forums with campus stakeholders. Half of the plans described how staff was responsible for campus sustainability (sustainability committee, office, and/or director) before the creation of the campus sustainability plan. Half of the plans had timelines attached to all of their goals. 36% of the plans assigned responsibility for all or some goals to a campus community member. Of these, 14% assigned a senior administrator responsible for each goal. Alternatively, we found that 36% of plans invited participation from campus community members in order to help implement the goals.

Moving Forward

Sustainability policy and plans are important components of campus sustainability that can support campus sustainability professionals, students, and other community members to understand and advance sustainability on campus. Campus sustainability transformation depends on what happens on the ground, including; levels of policy awareness, policy enactment, and an assessment of whether plan creation and design are indeed benefitting campus sustainability planning. These factors were not analyzed in this study, but will be included in the next phase of research and site-studies that will explore more comprehensively how sustainability is being advanced in Canadian education policy and practice. 🌱

For more information on this research, please see the following articles:

Lidstone, L., Wright, T., & Sherren, K. (2014). "An analysis of Canadian STARS-rated higher education sustainability policies." *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, Volume 17(2) (2015), 259-278

Lidstone, L., Wright, T., & Sherren, K. (2015). "Canadian STARS-rated campus sustainability plans: Priorities, plan creation and design." *Sustainability*, 7, 725-746

A related research paper can be found at www.sepn.ca: Vaughter, P., McKenzie, M., Lidstone, L., & Wright, T. (in press) "Campus Sustainability governance in Canada: A content analysis of post-secondary institutions' sustainability policies." *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*.

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education
Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives
David Suzuki Foundation
Learning for a Sustainable Future
Sierra Youth Coalition

CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

Assembly of First Nations
Canadian Federation of Students
Global Youth Education Network
Métis National Council
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