

Campus Sustainability Governance in Canada: Spotlight on the Content of Post-secondary Education Sustainability Policies

This research brief highlights analysis of the content of sustainability policies from a selection of 50 post-secondary institutions across Canada (colleges and universities). In the area of operations in particular, policies outline steps institutions are taking to further sustainability on their campuses. In contrast, the institutional domains of curriculum and research tend to lack implementation detail, such as plans and timelines, which can diminish the impact of the policies in furthering sustainability. Full results can be read in the academic paper: Vaughter, P., McKenzie, M., Lidstone, L., & Wright, T. (2016). Campus Sustainability Governance in Canada: A Content Analysis of Post-secondary Institutions' Sustainability Policies. *International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education*, 17(1), 16 – 39.

Framing Sustainability

Definitions Move Away From 'Environment': Of the 59 sustainability policies and plans reviewed (hereafter referred to as 'policies'), 43 include definitions of sustainability or related terminology, with a clear preference for the three pillar definition (a focus on the natural environment, society, and economy), or the Brundtland definition (sustainable development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations”) versus environment-specific ones. This seemed reflect a broader movement away from the language of environment and towards the language of sustainable development and sustainability over the past several decades.

Emphasis on Importance to Humanity: 16 out of 40 institutions indicated that sustainability is a responsibility of their institution to the world at large. Only three institutions (and all of these francophone institutions from Québec) framed this responsibility as an imperative because natural environments and/or ecosystems have intrinsic value in and of themselves. The majority of the institutions in the sample took a more anthropocentric approach, indicating that the natural environment is necessary for humanity and did not frame humanity as part of the natural environment or nature as having value in and of itself.

Implementing Sustainability

In many institutions, the policy focus was on operationalization in the 'environmental' sphere, such as in relation to energy use, waste reduction, and other physical infrastructure issues which fall under operations. While policies often link these issues to cost-savings, the central focus is on environmental inputs and outputs rather than on the associated social or economic health of the institution or region. There was very little detail in the domains of education, research, and community outreach on how policies to further sustainability should be implemented.

Governance: Within the examined sustainability policies and plans, the majority of institutions (32 out of 40) tied furthering sustainability to their institutional mission, vision, traditions, and/or overarching purpose for existing. 14 institutions describe themselves as leaders in sustainability in their policies, either in their local community, within higher education, or more broadly. Eight policies linked sustainability to the traditional, historic, and/or cultural identify of the institution.

Education (curriculum): Six institutions specifically discuss the development of curricula on environment and/or sustainability in their sustainability policies. However, the mandates typical offer little detail in terms of guidelines or timelines. Twelve institutions discussed the role of co-curricular activities in sustainability, such as student organizations, residential organizations, and other bodies.

Sustainability in 50 Canadian Post-secondary Institutions

Of the 50 institutions:



40 had high-level sustainability documents



17 institutions and sustainability policies



5 had sustainability plans



18 institutions had both sustainability policies and plans

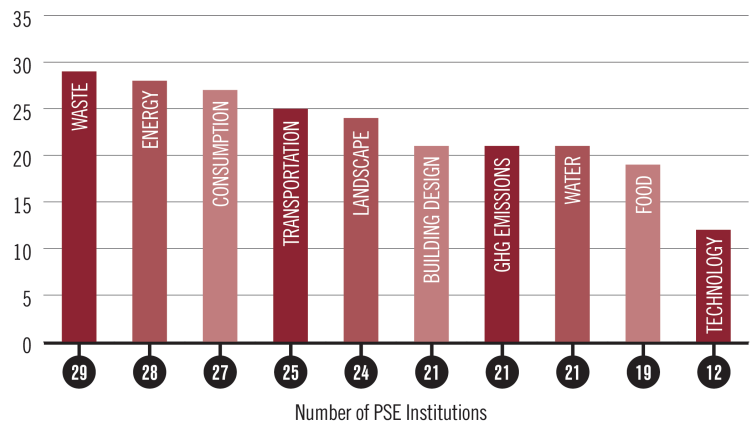
Research: Policies included few specifics as to what counts as ‘sustainability research’ or how such research will be identified and supported. There was a focus on increasing institutional leadership and reputation for sustainability research, yet few examples were given of specific research projects on sustainability. The sustainability-related strategic research priorities identified from the policies also tended to fall within more scientific or applied social science areas.

Community Outreach: Groups discussed in the sustainability policies included the ‘general public’ or the ‘campus community.’ City and provincial governments were frequently discussed as stakeholders in institutions’ sustainability policies, as was the business community. Aboriginal communities were referenced in the sustainability policies of three institutions. While students, staff, faculty, and administrators were all discussed as targets for sustainability outreach, students were occasionally framed as being ‘responsible’ for sustainability at an institution, while faculty and staff were given this obligation less frequently.

Campus operations and facilities: The majority of the content of sustainability policies was focused specifically on operations and facilities, outlining steps that institutions are taking to further sustainability on their campuses.

- **Waste:** 28 of the 40 institutions with policies included a discussion of waste, in particular waste reduction.
- **Energy:** 28 of the institutions addressed energy consumption either in terms of conserving energy (reducing usage/increasing efficiency) or converting to alternative energy (e.g., hydro, solar, wind). Those which approached this topic via conservation (25) generally focused on energy efficiency in campus building operations.
- **Transportation:** 25 institutions referred to transportation in their sustainability policies, with a central focus on encouraging less carbon-intensive means of travel, such as providing incentives for car-pooling; initiating mass transit passes for students, staff, and faculty; and designing more biking and walking paths to and from campuses. Institutions tended to focus on increasing efficiency in transportation rather than decreasing total number of commuters. There was little focus on transportation emissions in relation to the lack of student housing on campuses and the resulting number of student commuters.

Operations Issues in Sustainability Policies



It is also useful to consider the flip side of sustainability and identify how some institutions’ activities may be furthering ‘unsustainability.’ For example, student and faculty groups at a number of institutions in Canada have recently called for policies on fossil fuel divestment in order to help address, rather than to contribute to, climate change.

Need for more details in what constitutes ‘sustainability research.’

Without greater attention, there is a worry that parallels the broader concerns around three pillar approaches to sustainability, that researchers or institutions may think they are ‘doing sustainability research’ if they address any one of economic, social, or environmental considerations. Based on our analysis, we suggest a need to further address the institutional domain of ‘research’ by adding more specifics and ‘teeth’ in what is considered ‘sustainability research’ in sustainability policies and assessments. This also links to community outreach, as research partnerships with community partners (business, Aboriginal communities, community organizations, etc.) may determine the most significant impacts institutions have in relation to the (environmental) sustainability of off-campus communities.

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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