

## GREENWASHING IN EDUCATION: HOW NEOLIBERALISM AND POLICY MOBILITY MAY UNDERMINE ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability and neoliberalism are mobile concepts and processes that when twinned, undermine the way environmental sustainability is being developed and implemented in education policy and practice. This research brief summarizes a paper written by members of the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) which explores the impacts of neoliberalism on environmental sustainability education policy and practice.

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### Sustainability as a Vehicular Idea

Sustainability is a 'vehicular idea.' It is a flexible and vague concept which can be absorbed and used in different, even opposing, contexts. Cynically, it can serve to propel or greenwash economic interests; optimistically, it can allow for coalition building.

#### Mobility in Policy Studies

Sustainability, as a vehicular idea, is mobile and is increasingly being taken up in different ways across various contexts. Mobility approaches in policy studies focus on the movement of objects, people, and ideas around the globe. Rather than having a clear centre point or origin, policy is a product of its surroundings, influenced by ideas that are both situated and mobile, producing variations developed in response to different policy contexts and relationships. Mobility approaches to policy development are critical of the policy transfer-diffusion approach which focuses on policies as discrete objects which can be 'transferred' in whole to other locations and networks. Rather, mobility approaches emphasize the movement of policies as bits and pieces, which are also transformed through that process of movement and translation.

From this perspective, policy actors respond simultaneously to multiple policymaking networks, and to the tensions and contradictions that come along with these policy domains. They are part of a growing cadre of cosmopolitan policy advocates, aided by new communication technologies, who shape and move policies that are responsive to specific policy networks, think tanks, and media landscapes, and exert political influence through networks and the creation of new networks. Policy mobility is a useful frame for understanding sustainability as a vehicular idea in relation to processes of neoliberalization.

### SUSTAINABILITY

Engagement with issues of the natural environment in some capacity, including in relation to social, economic, culture, health, and other factors. While we are concerned with the various ways sustainability terminology is engaged, we have limited the scope to cases which include some consideration of environmental issues.



### NEOLIBERALISM

Political economic practices emphasizing individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.

#### Neoliberalization of Sustainability in Education Policy

Neoliberalism is likewise a vehicular concept travelling globally, taking specific forms in different locales, rather than presenting one single form of "neoliberalism." It can be described and analyzed as a process in relation to particular sites and situations, rather than discussing "neoliberalism" in sweeping catch-all ways.

Over the last several decades, policy development and practice have been increasingly influenced by the penetration of neoliberal processes into public spaces and bodies. Neoliberalization reframes educational institutions as competitive and commodified entities, and applies private sector management practices in this public sector. Campuses, teaching, and research priorities become commodified and privatized, amplifying relations of competition and an overall growing emphasis on measurable outputs. Neoliberalization filters not only how education is conceptualized and shaped through policy, but also how sustainability in education is understood and addressed.

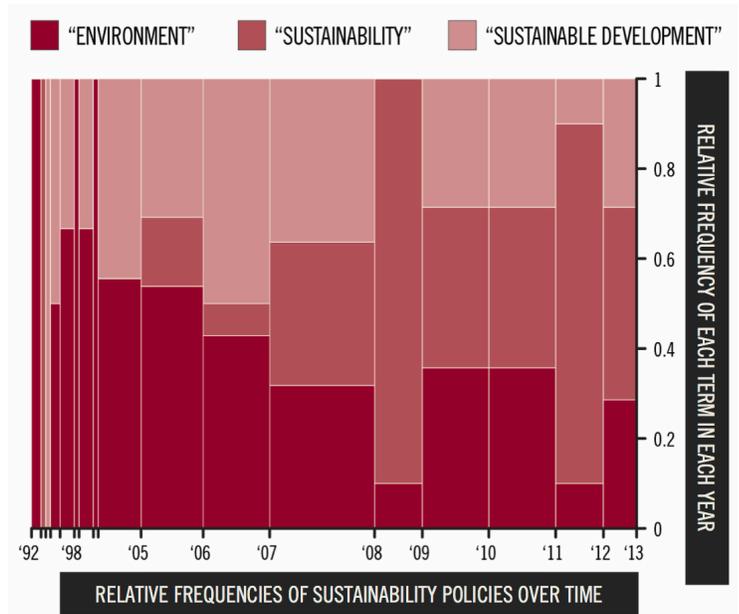
Sustainability in education is deeply susceptible to being framed in exclusively economic terms, which closes down possibilities that are more just and environmentally sustainable than what neoliberalism has to offer. Claims of a sustainability focus are increasingly a selling point in attracting students, faculty, and funders. In the worst case scenario of institutional greenwashing, sustainability policies and related high level initiatives such as signing of declarations, act as 'sustainability fixes' giving the appearance of taking steps towards protecting the environment while a higher prioritization remains given to the institution's economic considerations.

## Researching Sustainability in Education Policy of Canadian Post-secondary Institutions

SEPN's initial analysis suggests that increasing numbers of post-secondary institutions in Canada are developing sustainability-related policies. How language is used to discuss sustainability in education policy, and how its meaning shifts over time, are indicators of how sustainability is a vehicular concept with increasing popularity, potentially brought on by its links to neoliberalism.

### Shifts in Terminology

There have been shifts in language around environmental sustainability over the past several decades. In SEPN's research study of Canada's 220 post-secondary institutions, 69 out of 110 institutions with sustainability policies included definitions of their terminology, from higher uses of the term 'environment' to increasing uses of 'sustainable development' and now most recently, 'sustainability,' which is the current most frequently used term.



### THE THREE PILLARS DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

ECONOMY     SOCIETY     NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

The three pillars is a sustainability concept used to describe the relationship between the 'natural environment,' 'society' and 'economy.' It is based on the understanding that without a natural environment human beings would not exist, and without a society to create it, there would be no economy.

The 'nested' hierarchy model (above left) is distinct from the segmented model where the pillars are seen as separate (above right), because it emphasizes the interrelationship between the three pillars.

### Definitions of Sustainability

Almost a third of the policies included a definition of sustainability which included a focus on the natural environment, society, and economy, or what is often called a 'three pillars' definition of sustainability. However, within the policies reviewed, there was no mention of any hierarchy or prioritization of these three elements.

The vagueness of a sustainability definition without explicit prioritization runs the risk of enabling sustainability as a vehicular idea that functions as both a floating signifier through its ambiguity (anything can be 'greenwashed' while business continues as usual), as well as enabling sustainability to be 'fixed' in certain ways (i.e., giving priority to a particular pillar).

For this reason, it is important to look at how sustainability is understood in education policies, and whether priorities of neoliberalization are embedded within how sustainability is conceptualized and practiced.

Segmenting the three pillars can thus insulate the economy pillar from those of social and environmental sustainability, enabling a form of neoliberal sustainability.

#### 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  
 Sustainability Solutions Group

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