

# STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR SUSTAINABILITY IN CANADIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Strategic plans help higher education institutions (HEIs) envision and communicate their organizational goals and the actions needed to achieve those goals. In Canada, a decentralized education system provides HEIs with a great deal of autonomy in defining strategic directions, including in relation to sustainability. However, to date, there has been little empirical research on the connections between strategic planning and sustainability in higher education (SHE). To address this gap, the Sustainability and Education Policy Network (SEPN) examined the connections between strategic planning and sustainability uptake in the strategic plans of a sample of 50 Canadian HEIs. SEPN's research has implications for the role of institutional strategic plans in long term planning for SHE and will be of interest to policy makers and those working in sustainability in higher education.

For full results see: Bieler, A., & McKenzie, M. (2017). Strategic Planning for Sustainability in Canadian Higher Education, *Sustainability*, 9, 161. doi:10.3390/su9020161.

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## Content Analysis of Strategic Plans

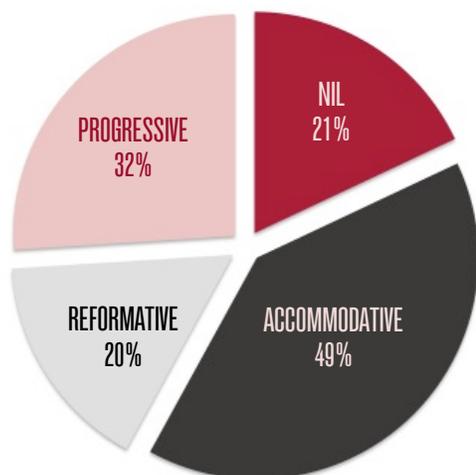
- SEPN conducted a content analysis of 50 HEI's strategic plans to examine the depth and breath with which sustainability was included as a significant policy priority, including across **five sustainability domains**: (1) governance, (2) education, (3) campus operations, (4) research, and (5) community outreach.
- Each HEI's strategic plan was classified according to type of **institutional sustainability response**, using an adapted version of Sterling's 2013 framework.

## Findings

**Type of Response:** A total of nine strategic plans (21%) did not include any discussion of sustainability.

**Accommodative responses** were the most common institutional response, seen in 20 (49%) of 41 strategic plans, indicating limited engagement with sustainability in the sample. Some HEIs made only brief references to one or two sustainability domains in their plans (these institutions typically had no sustainability policy), while other institutions had in-depth discussions in relation to institutional sustainability goals and an accompanying sustainability policy but concentrated on only one or two sustainability domains.

**Reformative responses** were least frequent, found in only eight (20%) strategic plans. These plans most commonly addressed sustainability in only three domains, but often related sustainability to core institutional values and/or sustainability goals in great depth. All reformative responses were seen in institutions which also had a sustainability policy.



**Progressive responses** were seen in 13 (32%) of the strategic plans analyzed. Progressive responses typically took one of two forms. Eight plans in this category addressed four or five sustainability domains and included significant sustainability content in relation to the institution's core values and goals. The remaining five plans addressed all sustainability domains and engaged in meaningful discussions of sustainability in relation to values, goals, and sustainability plans. However, progressive responses did not engage institutions in the types of transformative redesign processes that lead to systemic institutional change. All progressive responders had a sustainability policy.

None of the plans exhibited **transformative responses**, such as reorienting educational purposes and paradigms to correspond with sustainability values, and consideration of Indigenous land and worldviews. **A lack of engagement with community outreach**—in particular acknowledgements of the histories of settlement, land, and territory in the regions which HEIs are located—was evident in all strategic plans, regardless of the type of response.

## INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY RESPONSE TYPES

**NIL** No engagement with sustainability in policy or practice

**ACCOMMODATIVE** Sustainability one of many policy priorities; 1-2 sustainability domains addressed in various depth

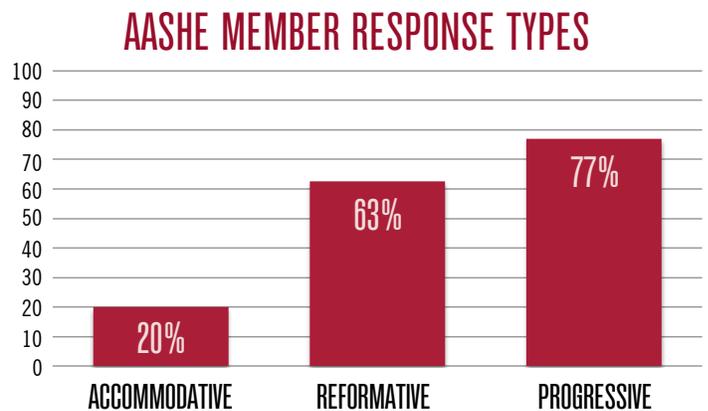
**REFORMATIVE** Some alignment of policy priorities with sustainability values in 3-5 domains, varying depth of discussion

**PROGRESSIVE** Sustainability in mission, goals, policy across 4-5 domains; no focus on alternative paradigms, land, etc.

**TRANSFORMATIVE** Rethinks educational paradigms in relation to land, place, ecology, community

**Sustainability Initiatives:** Drawing on the results of SEPN's previous Canada-wide census of sustainability policy initiatives which categorized sustainability initiative (SI) leaders as having all four types of initiative (assessment, declaration, policy, office), and laggards as having none of these initiatives, SEPN examined the relationship between type of response and SI leadership. SEPN found **SI leaders engaged more strongly with sustainability in strategic planning:** only 7 of the 20 (or 35%) accommodative responders were SI leaders, whereas 4 of 8 (50%) reformative and 10 of 13 (77%) progressive responders were SI leaders.

**AASHE Membership:** Institutions affiliated with the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) were more likely to exhibit reformative or progressive sustainability responses in their strategic plans. Only 4 of 20 (20%) accommodative responders were AASHE members whereas 5 of the 8 (63%) reformative responders and 10 of the 13 (77%) progressive responders were AASHE members, suggesting institutional membership to AASHE may be a significant factor in progressive engagement with sustainability at the strategic planning level.



## Strategic Planning for Sustainability in Higher Education: Key Findings

SEPN's findings point to the need for **stronger engagement with sustainability at the strategic planning level** in the Canadian higher education sector. The shift to transformative sustainability responses requires HEIs to re-conceptualize the purpose of higher education and re-think existing educational paradigms in relation to land, place, ecology, and community.

**Institutional Accountability:** SEPN found weak language related to sustainability and a lack of specific sustainability goals, particularly in accommodative and reformative plans. Policy makers and those working in sustainability at institutions in the accommodative and reformative stages of sustainability uptake may consider **adopting more integrative, holistic, and concrete policy targets** at the strategic planning level. Clearly articulated institutional sustainability goals and targets are **more easily monitored** by accountability mechanisms, which may improve sustainability uptake.

**Overcoming Barriers:** Institutions working to adopt more integrative sustainability innovations are likely to encounter **resistance**. Previous research suggests barriers to sustainability engagement in HEIs include: (1) complex and shifting **governance structures**, particularly as HEIs move increasingly towards corporate governance models, with increased centralization of decision-making and less democratic engagement; (2) the high degree of **academic autonomy** afforded to faculties and departments in Canadian HEIs, which means units may not engage with sustainability unless it fits into existing identities, teaching, and research objectives; and (3) faculty being deterred by **perceptions that a sustainability focus equates to teaching a particular set of values**.

### SHIFTING EDUCATIONAL PARADIGMS

- ✓ Specific, concrete sustainability goals
  - ✓ AASHE assessment processes
  - ✓ Integrated, holistic targets
- ✓ Improved monitoring capabilities
- ✓ Re-conceptualizing purposes of education
- ✓ Integration of Indigenous perspectives

### OVERCOMING BARRIERS

- ✗ Complex, corporatized governance structures
- ✗ High faculty and departmental autonomy
- ✗ Fit with identity, teaching, research priorities
- ✗ Politicization of sustainability values

**Shifting Educational Paradigms:** The need for stronger engagement with sustainability in strategic planning was particularly evident in the large number of institutions with no references to sustainability in their strategic plans, a predominance of accommodative responses, and a lack of transformative responses. Even strategic plans with substantial sustainability content in SEPN's research did not include the types of paradigm-shifting visions characteristic of transformative responses to SHE. Sustainability actors, particularly those in HEIs with accommodative responses, could be **working across multiple spheres of policymaking and pushing for higher quality sustainability content in strategic plans**. The shift to transformative sustainability responses requires HEIs to **re-think existing educational paradigms and re-conceptualize the purpose of higher education to support the transition to more sustainable societies**.

#### 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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