SUSTAINABILITY IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ALLIANCES: A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF MISSION STATEMENTS

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Abstract: *This study analyzes how 17 European university alliances from the first wave of the European Universities Initiative (2019) frame sustainability education in their mission statements. Using reflexive thematic analysis, three themes emerged: Student Agency, Driving Sustainable Change, and Navigating Global-Local Dynamics through Posthuman Bildung. The findings highlight how alliances align global sustainability goals, such as the SDGs, with local contexts, emphasizing collective responsibility, relational engagement, and ecological interconnectedness. This research sheds light on the transformative role of alliances in advancing sustainability in higher education.*

Key words: *s*ustainability, European University Alliances, posthumanism, thematic analysis.

1. Introduction

Sustainability is a growing priority for higher education institutions (HEIs), positioning universities as drivers of societal transformation through ethical responsibility and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2017). The European Universities Initiative (EUI), launched in 2019, advances this goal by establishing transnational alliances that address global challenges like climate change and social inclusion (Pereira et al., 2023). These alliances use sustainability with innovation and mobility, reflecting higher education's role in fostering equity and resilience (Taylor, 2016).

National strategies, such as Romania's 2030 plan, complement these efforts by promoting sustainability in curricula and encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration. However, limited research explores how European university alliances embed sustainability in their strategies. This study analyzes mission statements of EUI to examine how these alliances align with global sustainability agendas, providing insights into HEIs' role in advancing sustainable practices and education in the Anthropocene (Barad, 2007; Ashwin, 2022; Sporn & Godonoga, 2024).

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1.1. Sustainability in Higher Education

HEIs play a pivotal role in advancing sustainability, addressing global challenges like climate change, technological shifts, and social inequality. Sustainability education, centered on ethical responsibility, systems thinking, and global citizenship, has become integral to HEIs' missions, preparing students for complex futures through innovative and interdisciplinary learning (UNESCO, 2017; Sporn & Godonoga, 2024).

University alliances, particularly under initiatives like the European Universities Initiative (EUI), advance sustainability across borders by fostering knowledge transfer, regional development, and collaborative research, embedding these values in institutional mission statements (Pinheiro et al., 2015). The prominence of societal engagement as a "third mission" highlights universities as agents of social transformation, aligning sustainability with social responsibility and regional development (Lebeau & Cochrane, 2015).

As challenges grow more complex, sustainability education increasingly requires interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches (Tsao et al., 2022). Posthumanist perspectives challenge traditional human-centered models, advocating for relational, collaborative learning involving human, non-human, and material interactions (Taylor, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Barad, 2007). This aligns with HEIs' evolving role in embedding sustainability into curricula, reframing education as a transformative, collective process (Taylor, 2016; Braidotti et al., 2018).

Transdisciplinary frameworks such as assemblages and refrains conceptualize sustainability education by bridging global goals like the SDGs with localized engagement (Tsao et al., 2022). Regional variations also shape sustainability priorities; for example, Scandinavian universities often focus on climate change, while Eastern European institutions emphasize social justice and economic equality (Stensaker & Hermansen, 2023).

Despite substantial research on sustainability in individual universities (Lebeau & Cochrane, 2015), fewer studies explore how transnational alliances articulate sustainability in mission statements. This study addresses this gap, offering insights into how European university alliances frame sustainability education as a transformative response to societal and ecological challenges.

1.2. The Integration of Global and Local Sustainability Agendas

The interplay between global sustainability frameworks and localized approaches is a key focus in higher education sustainability research, particularly within European university alliances. Pinheiro et al. (2015) emphasize how universities align with global commitments like the SDGs through regional initiatives, but their impact depends on adapting these goals to local contexts.

This global-local tension shapes how alliances frame sustainability education. Mission statements reveal how they balance global imperatives with local political, economic, and environmental priorities, aligning with the third mission of societal engagement and regional development (Pinheiro et al., 2015). For example, regional needs influence

sustainability strategies differently, with Scandinavian universities often prioritizing climate innovation and renewable energy, while Eastern European institutions emphasize social justice and economic equality (Pereira et al., 2023).

The European Universities Initiative (EUI) exemplifies this balance through transnational collaborations. Northern European universities emphasize environmental policy, while Southern European institutions address challenges like migration and inequality (Zenkienė & Leišytė, 2024). These alliances demonstrate how global sustainability goals are integrated with localized practices, advancing education across borders.

Understanding the interaction between global frameworks and local contexts is essential for analyzing how European alliances frame sustainability education. Local factors shape their sustainability strategies within transnational collaborations, highlighting how alliances address regional needs while contributing to sustainable futures.

1.3. Methodologies used in Higher Education Research on Sustainability

Research on sustainability in higher education institutions (HEIs) employs diverse methodologies to explore how sustainability is integrated into institutional frameworks, particularly through mission statements and pedagogical strategies. These approaches are vital for understanding HEIs' commitment to preparing students as global citizens and sustainability leaders.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is widely used to examine sustainability narratives in institutional texts, such as mission and vision statements. CDA provides a lens for understanding how sustainability is framed in alignment with global frameworks, as demonstrated by Tetley and Koch (2024) in their analysis of global science-policy collaboration.

Critical Geopolitics further aids in understanding how global political and environmental dynamics shape sustainability practices in higher education. Kushnir and Yazgan (2024) show how climate change, technological advancements, and political shifts influence educational policies. For European university alliances, this framework helps reveal how mission statements balance global goals, like the SDGs, with localized sustainability needs. The methodological flexibility emphasized by Fien (2002) is central to sustainability research in higher education. It allows for integrating diverse approaches to address the complexity of sustainability initiatives. Mission statements themselves are critical texts that reflect institutional priorities and commitments. As Lebeau and Cochrane (2015) note, UK universities have reoriented their missions to emphasize regional engagement and sustainability. Similarly, Leal Filho et al., (2023) highlight how higher education institutions are integrating the UN Sustainable Development Goals into their institutional strategiesas. The authors indicate that while many HEIs consider sustainability as part of their mission, vision, and operations, the level of emphasis on the specific SDGs is more limited.

This study examines the mission statements of European university alliances to explore how sustainability learning is framed, emphasizing ethical, ecological, and relational dimensions. Using posthumanist Bildung, it investigates pedagogical approaches, student

agency, and global-local sustainability dynamics. The study contributes to the discourse on sustainability education by analyzing how alliances align with global agendas while addressing local contexts. The research questions are:

● How do the mission statements of European university alliances describe education as a way to achieve sustainability?
● How do the mission statements portray students as active participants in sustainability efforts and lifelong learning?
● How are global challenges linked to local challenges within alliances?

2. Theoretical Framework

In this study I use the concept of Bildung reinterpreted from a posthumanist perspectives (Taylor, 2016; Gur-Ze'ev, 2002), to examine how European university alliances frame sustainability education in their mission statements. Traditionally rooted in the German educational tradition (Biesta, 2002), Bildung emphasizes personal development, intellectual growth, and academic freedom (Taylor, 2016). However, posthumanist Bildung reimagines learning as a relational and ecological process, where knowledge emerges through interactions among human and nonhuman entities (Taylor, 2016; Braidotti, 2013). This shift enables a more inclusive understanding of sustainability that goes beyond individual achievement to encompass collective and ecological responsibilities.

In this context, posthumanist Bildung emphases the interconnectedness of people, environments, and materiality. Sustainability education can be reframed as a continuous, collaborative process that addresses global challenges by fostering ethical, relational, and ecological engagement (Braidotti et al., 2018). This approach aligns with the transformative potential of higher education, enabling institutions to navigate complex global sustainability issues by positioning learning as a process of collective responsibility rather than individual progress.

3. Methodology

This study analyzed the mission statements of 17 European university alliances established in 2019 during the first wave of the European Universities Initiative (EUI). The alliances included UNA Europa (1EUROPE), 4EU+, ARQUS, CHARM-EU, CIVICA, CIVIS, EU-CONEXUS, ECIU, EDUC, EPICUR, EU4ART, EUGLOH, EUTOPIA, FORTHEM, SEA-EU, UNITE!, and YUFE. These documents were retrieved from official alliance websites.

To examine how sustainability is represented, reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013; 2021) was employed. This qualitative method identifies and interprets patterns of meaning in textual data, making it well-suited for analyzing institutional texts. Both semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) meanings were explored to capture the full range of sustainability representations in the mission statements.

The analysis followed an inductive process, involving repeated readings, open coding, and theme refinement until theoretical saturation was achieved (Saldaña, 2009).

MAXQDA software supported data organization and analysis.

By applying post humanist concepts, the study provides insights into how European university alliances frame sustainability education. It contributes to understanding how these alliances reconcile global sustainability goals with local contexts and position themselves as key actors in addressing ecological and societal challenges.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of European university alliances' mission statements identified three themes that reveal how sustainability education empowers students, engages communities, and connects global and local challenges. These are: Student Agency in the Co-Creation of Sustainable Futures, Driving Sustainable Change and Empowering Communities, and Navigating Global-Local Sustainability Dynamics through Posthuman Bildung. Together, these themes highlight education as a relational and participatory process driving transformation.

4.1. Theme 1: Student Agency in the Co-Creation of Sustainable Futures

The analysis of mission statements from European university alliances underscores a reimagining of students' roles in sustainability education, positioning them as active participants embedded within interconnected ecologies of learning. This approach reflects a relational and co-creative framework, emphasizing the inseparability of knowing and being. Rather than viewing students as passive recipients of knowledge, these alliances frame them as dynamic agents of change, collaboratively shaping transformative sustainability practices in partnership with educators, non-human entities, and material contexts (Taylor, 2016).

For example, CIVICA stresses "student agency in the co-creation of flexible learning opportunities", and CHARM-EU emphasizes a "student-centred" model that encourages challenge-driven learning. This reflects a view of education where knowledge is co-constructed through interaction and collaboration, recognizing the relational nature of sustainability learning, which involves both human and non-human actors (Braidotti, 2013. SEA-EU mission aims to "offer a broad spectrum of personalised skilled-based curricula and a development-oriented education environment to strengthen European students' creativity and engagement" or to create "a European campus where all students and staff could experience Europe through a rich and varied offer of activities and cooperation that generates an organisational culture based on open governance and co-creation with internal and external stakeholders."

Similarly, EU-CONEXUS fosters student participation in governance and identity-building through "joint study programmes, cultural activities, and the Student Board". This is in line with posthumanist Bildung, where education is understood as a collective, ongoing process that connects local and global sustainability challenges (Tsao et al., 2022). The emphasis on student involvement across these documents positions learners as key contributors to broader societal and ecological transformations, extending beyond individual academic growth to collective, ethical responsibility.

4.2. Theme 2: Driving Sustainable Change and Empowering Communities

This theme explores how European university alliances foster sustainable change by integrating global sustainability frameworks, such as the SDGs, with regional priorities, creating participatory approaches to education and action (Pinheiro et al., 2015). These strategies reflect posthumanist Bildung's emphasis on relationality and interconnectedness, highlighting education as a process of fostering ethical and material relationships between humans, and the environment (Taylor, 2016).

Alliances like Unite! demonstrate this commitment through initiatives such as its "Network of Regional Innovation Ecosystems," while CIVIS promotes "mutually beneficial interactions" between universities and local communities, illustrating how global imperatives are adapted to regional needs. Similarly, EU-CONEXUS integrates community members into co-creative processes, aligning with posthumanist Bildung's focus on shared agency and collective responsibility.

The alliances' focus on sustainability and inclusivity aligns with Taylor's (2016) notion of education as an ethico-onto-epistemological quest. EUTOPIA's emphasis on "sustainable, responsible, and ethical attitudes" and regional variations, such as Scandinavian universities' focus on renewable energy and Eastern European institutions' work on social justice (Pereira et al., 2023), reflect how regional priorities shape localized approaches to sustainability.

Knowledge creation within these alliances is framed as collaborative and collective. CIVICA emphasizes "bottom-up initiatives," while CIVIS fosters "mutually beneficial interactions", aligning with the third mission of universities that prioritizes societal engagement and regional development (Pinheiro et al., 2015).

Diversity and inclusion remain central to these missions. EDUC promotes equity, stating that "inclusion and gender equality are integral to our mission", while EU4ART highlights cultural diversity and local identities. Such approaches empower marginalized voices and demonstrate how global frameworks can foster localized sustainability practices (Zenkienė & Leišytė, 2024).

European university alliances emerge as transformative actors in sustainability education, emphasizing relational engagement, shared agency, and inclusivity. Their efforts align global goals with regional priorities, addressing societal and environmental challenges collaboratively and contextually. This resonates with Taylor's (2016) vision of education as an interconnected and ethical process, showcasing the potential of alliances to empower communities and drive sustainable change across diverse contexts.

4.3. Theme 3: Navigating Global-Local Sustainability Dynamics

The third theme, is very closed to the second one, but it emphasizes the interplay between global sustainability frameworks, such as the SDGs, and localized, context-sensitive actions within European university alliances. It describes how the global-local relationship is interconnected, focusing on balancing these scales in a participatory and ethical process. This theme reflects more than the second on the relationality between

these two dimensions, rather than focusing on empowerment or action at the community level. In this sense, posthuman Bildung conceptualizes this dynamic not as a dichotomy but as an interconnected process where global and local imperatives co-shape educational and societal outcomes. This perspective emphasizes relationality, ethical engagement, and co-creation, offering a framework for reconciling these scales of action.

Posthuman Bildung reframes global-local alignment as a relational and participatory endeavor. Taylor (2016) highlights Bildung as the inseparability of knowing and being, rooted in the materiality and ecology of relations. For example, EU-CONEXUS integrates "local and regional ecosystems" into research and education, while EPICUR builds on "thematic expertise from regional ecosystems." These approaches exemplify how alliances balance global imperatives with local priorities, reflecting Bildung's commitment to interconnected societal transformation.

Ethical relations, central to posthuman Bildung, are evident in alliances' approaches to sustainability. SEA-EU frames universities, cities, and communities as "frontier spaces and sites of connectivity," emphasizing the ethical responsibility of bridging global and local priorities. By fostering "mutually beneficial interactions," these alliances align with Bildung's ecological and relational ethics, where global frameworks are collaboratively integrated with local actions to address shared challenges.

Interdisciplinarity and co-creation are also essential to this dynamic. SEA-EU's multidisciplinary platform for sustainable development and ECIU's vision of an "agile, open agora" for solving societal challenges underscore the alliances' commitment to transcending disciplinary boundaries. This approach aligns with Bildung's rethinking of education as a collective and iterative process, integrating diverse knowledge systems and actors to respond to complex challenges at global and local scales.

Through posthuman Bildung, the balancing of global and local sustainability dynamics becomes a participatory and ethical process centered on relationality, co-creation, and interdisciplinarity. By embedding these principles in their practices, European university alliances exemplify Bildung's transformative ethos, addressing global imperatives while meeting the unique needs of local ecosystems. This reconceptualization positions alliances as mediators of global-local tensions and active contributors to a sustainable, interconnected future.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how European university alliances articulate sustainability education within their mission statements, guided by three research questions. The analysis revealed three key themes that provide nuanced insights into the role of education in sustainability efforts, the positioning of students as active participants, and the interplay between global and local challenges.

First, the findings show that sustainability education is described as a shared, ecosystemic endeavor. Mission statements emphasize the relational and collective nature of education, positioning universities as dynamic entities that connect diverse stakeholders. For example, CIVICA frames sustainability as a "core European value",

highlighting education's transformative potential to foster social and ecological change. Similarly, CIVIS prepares students as "global citizens", addressing interconnected global challenges. These statements demonstrate that sustainability education transcends traditional knowledge transmission, fostering collaboration and collective responsibility to address complex challenges.

Second, students emerge as central figures in sustainability efforts. The mission statements consistently portray students as co-creators of knowledge and active participants in sustainability initiatives. Participatory practices, such as CIVICA's emphasis on student governance and CHARM-EU's challenge-based learning models, empower students to engage deeply in shaping sustainability projects. This shift from hierarchical to participatory models of education reflects a broader transformation aligned with posthumanist Bildung, where shared agency and co-creation redefine the learning process.

Finally, the study highlights how alliances bridge global sustainability imperatives with local priorities. The mission statements illustrate how alliances mediate the tension between these scales, linking frameworks like the SDGs to specific regional challenges. For instance, Arqus grounds its sustainability work in local ecosystems, while CIVICA extends its impact through partnerships with NGOs and socio-economic actors. These approaches demonstrate the alliances' ability to integrate multidisciplinarity and stakeholder engagement to create meaningful connections between global goals and local action.

These themes reflect how sustainability education is being reimagined as a participatory and relational process. They challenge traditional paradigms, offering a vision of education that is deeply collaborative, ethical, and context-sensitive. This shift extends theoretical perspectives like posthumanist Bildung by illustrating how education fosters collective transformation rather than focusing solely on individual development.

The findings hold practical implications for higher education institutions. Universities can draw from these insights to implement participatory governance models, foster interdisciplinary collaboration, and design sustainability initiatives that connect global frameworks with regional needs. Equally important is the focus on equity and inclusion, ensuring that sustainability strategies are relevant and accessible to diverse communities.

Future research could build on these insights by exploring the lived experiences of students, educators, and stakeholders engaged in sustainability efforts. Longitudinal studies could examine how relational and participatory approaches evolve over time and assess their long-term impact. Investigating diverse student populations across cultural and socioeconomic contexts would also deepen our understanding of how sustainability education can address varying needs and challenges.

This study demonstrates how European university alliances are redefining sustainability education as a shared, transformative endeavor. By framing education within participatory and relational paradigms, these alliances model how higher education can respond to global and local challenges in innovative and inclusive ways. Their work inspires a vision of education that prepares students to navigate the complexities of sustainability while fostering interconnected and ethical futures.

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