



From Students' Personal Transformation to Sustainable Development in Higher Education

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Abstract: *This paper highlights the link between the development of sustainable higher education and subjective change in student needs and expectations. Based on the research findings presented in this paper, while the debate on how universities should offer sustainable development to students continues, students' needs are undergoing changes that promote sustainable higher education development. Nowadays, students are changing their perception of themselves, and their development in individual and social contexts, and as a result, they are changing their understanding of university. Material conditions are pushed to the background, as well as the need for student initiatives and events. Students put the ability of universities to accept, understand and provide for their personal and professional development first. More than ever, students critically evaluate the quality of education based on their understanding of how education should meet their individual developmental needs and the actual education they receive.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Global Goals for Sustainable Development have set higher education many important tasks. Understanding the important functions that higher education performs in relation to individual development, and therefore to society as a whole, has shown that today more than ever the individual, personal context must be taken into account if we are to achieve change in the whole. Individual knowledge and motivation for action, the personal understanding of the meaning of the steps towards achieving the common goal, turns out to be that specific individual context on the development of which the fulfilment of the whole depends. Thus, higher education, which today has the task of integrating the idea of sustainability (Idoiaga Mondragon et al., 2023, p. 2), should introduce the principles of sustainability in the strategies of higher education institutions (Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021, p. 99), to fulfill its task at all levels of education (González-Pérez & Ramírez-Montoya, 2022, p. 1493) and in all elements of education from the organization of the learning process and teaching methods to the relationship between students and teachers and the way students feel in higher education. By expanding its commitment to student development, higher education today is moving beyond its formerly core purpose of providing the scientific and practical knowledge for successful professional development.

At the beginning of the 21st century, Europe joined forces in creating unified standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education, which Muhamedbegović et al. (2015) called „a unifying momentum for progress“ (p. 1). As a result, international reflection on the problems in higher education and the possibilities for improving its quality is intensifying. In 2005, the first common framework of standards and guidelines for quality assurance in European higher education (ESG) emerged. It introduced uniform criteria for quality assurance in European higher education. In 2014, the European Quality Assurance Framework (EQUAF) was launched. The Bologna Follow-up

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Group (BFUG) approved a revised version of the ESG, and in May 2015 the Bologna Process Ministerial Meeting formally adopted the revised standards and guidelines.

One of the relatively new elements in the evaluation of the quality of higher education is the participation of students in the evaluation process and the discussion of mechanisms to improve its condition. Students' satisfaction with the curricula and the atmosphere in the higher education institution has become an essential element of education monitoring. For the first time, in generations, education has turned its attention to the fact that the student and their need for education is the real user of the service, and the successful development of the student affects the well-being of all. Attention to the needs of students has intensified. The degree of student satisfaction with the learning process and the atmosphere of the higher education institution as a whole has taken an important place in the study of the quality of education provided by higher education institutions.

This article presents the results of a survey of Bulgarian students' opinions on the importance of certain indicators used to assess the quality of higher education. The study was conducted in 2023, with 44 (30%) students from Technical University who study social sciences. They represent 30% of all first, second, third and fourth year students studying social sciences. The students were selected to participate using the respondent method.

The study shows a process of transformation of student criteria of quality of higher education institutions as a whole. Among the 74 quality indicators derived from multiple international studies, students place first an indicator related to the degree of acceptance and respect they feel in the higher education institution. The importance of the treatment they receive, present in many studies to date but rarely brought to the top, indicates a dynamic in students' values. Students perceive higher education as an integrated part of their overall development, rather than a distanced and only focused on professional manifestations part of their lives.

The transformation of students' perception of higher education found in this study coincides with the concept of sustainable education, which today, more than ever, focuses the learning process on each student's ability to reflect on and realize himself as a person who, through his potential, decisions and actions, influences the environment around him.

2. TRANSFORMATION OF STUDENT QUALITY CRITERIA FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

The development of the understanding that individual development today, influences the development of the whole tomorrow, and increases the commitment to one's own development and responsibility to the development of the whole. This new construct in understanding the meaning of development increases the requirements for universities, which have the functions to develop, guide and unfold the potential of their students. Education, as [Mattos et al. \(2023\)](#) put it has a „noble mission of, with its practices, informing, training, and transforming those with whom it comes into contact“ (p.1). Achieving this in the context of accelerated global change processes reinforces the need to transform higher education into sustainable higher education ([Kocot et al., 2024](#)). But how to achieve this today, when the focus is already on sustainable development, is a question that fills our contemporary research and analysis of practices more or less achieving this new goal.

It is now widely believed that the behaviour of students in higher education shows a growing disinterest in the learning process, a decline in motivation to learn and a decline in academic achievement. This change is more often associated with a loss of interest in their development and disinterest

in education in general, and less often with a gap between what students seek in education and what it provides. Indeed, the behaviour of students in many higher education institutions shows a loss of interest and low motivation for academic achievement, but is this really due to a decline in interest in the development and higher education as providing this?

This article, like other articles, joins its research findings to the idea that the observed student behavior is not due to a change in interest in higher education. Rather, what we are witnessing today is a transformation in students' understanding of the place of higher education in the context of their individual development and a disconnect between their perceived need for development and how universities provide for that need. And this is not about 'consumer demand'. This is about a shift in focus from higher education as a tool for professional fulfilment to an increased individual awareness of the real role of education in personal development and hence in the whole societal context.

Highly relevant research such as that of [Ashwin et al. \(2023\)](#) today shows that students are personally engaged with the knowledge they acquire and the role that education plays in their future development (pp. 1-12). [Ashwin et al. \(2023\)](#) also talk about how students are transformed through their engagement with knowledge (pp. 15-28). Their research shows that two-thirds of students show a personal commitment to the knowledge they are studying and a clear sense of the role it will play in their future lives (p. 27). [Beatty et al. \(1997\)](#) promote knowledge of the different purposes for which students enter university (p. 74) and the understanding that this determines their orientation to learning and their patterns of behaviour. And if students use a complex combination of reasons in their choice of higher education, say [Beatty et al. \(1997\)](#), it is ultimately in their individual contexts that education achieves their individual goals (p. 86). [Beatty et al. \(1997\)](#) argue that students' orientations determine their perceptions and behaviors in the learning process (p. 86). Students' disinterest or increased passiveness in the learning process is a reaction to a mismatch in the pace of development of higher education compared to the pace of change in students' views toward the role of education in their development. When students do not understand the link between academic knowledge and their personal development project, they do not value the education they receive and lose a sense of the path they are on ([Ashwin et al., 2023, p. 26](#)). [Case et al. \(2018\)](#) also remind us that university education does not only influence graduates' opportunities to find jobs and achieve better living conditions. University education is part of a student's developmental pathway and engagement with the world around them.

In most cases, the adaptation of higher education institutions to the needs of students is seen as a process of adapting services to the needs of users. And this raises the question of whether it is the needs of students that should determine the direction of higher education and where this will lead? The view of this report is - that addressing the current state of higher education needs creates real opportunities for sustainable education and overall sustainable development.

This study joins research on contemporary higher education students' expectations of learning conditions and educational outcomes in preparing them for a sustainable future. It starts from the understanding that the contemporary context and the quest for sustainable development increase students' criticality towards the education they receive. Increased levels of understanding of personal engagement and participation in global development processes, (no matter at what level they take place), influence the criteria for quality assurance of education. For example, this study shows an increase in the importance of how students feel about university, even putting this criterion first above all other criteria. There is an increase in the criticality of the knowledge they receive and

the extent to which it is directly related to their future career. There is an increased requirement for teaching methods to support the understanding of theoretical knowledge and the acquisition of skills for future employment. There is a growing need for prior access to curricula and study programmes so that students can choose the universities and courses that best match their needs. The focus shifts from relationships with colleagues to relationships with teachers.

Table 1. Criteria for assessing the quality of education in the higher education institution with the highest score

N	Criteria	Score on a scale from 0 to 7
1	It is important for students' education whether they feel accepted at the university	6,78
2	It is important that the knowledge I gain at university is useful for my development as a specialist in the field I am studying	6,77
3	It is important that teaching methods help students learn practical skills	6,76
4	It is important for students' education that they have access to the curricula for each subject	6,76
5	Having access to information about the exam schedule is important for training	6,75
6	It is important that the curricula are adequate to the specialty I am studying	6,74
7	Access to information about the timetable is important for studies	6,73
8	Relationships between students and lecturers are important	6,71
9	It is important that the curriculum in which I attend includes subjects, the study of which provide them with the necessary knowledge for future good professional realization.	6,71
10	It is important that teaching methods help students to grasp the material well	6,67

Source: Own research

On the other hand, the study shows a decline in the need for students to join student clubs, initiatives, events, scientific forums and projects. There is also a decline in the evaluation of the importance of the material conditions provided by the university - including the conditions in lecture halls and laboratories.

Table 2. Criteria for assessing the quality of education in the higher education institution with the lowest score

N	Criteria	Score on a scale from 0 to 7
1	It is important whether the studies provide opportunities to join student clubs	5,49
2	It is important whether students have the opportunity to get involved in student initiatives during their studies	5,51
3	It is important for students' learning that they have access to information about complaints procedures	5,67
4	For studies, access to information on international mobility opportunities is important	5,76
5	It is important whether the course provides opportunities for students to get involved in university or faculty projects	5,81
6	The availability of access to information about scientific forums for students is important for learning	5,85
7	Laboratory conditions in general are important for student learning	5,93
8	The temperature in the classrooms and laboratories is important for the education of students (to be warm in winter and cool on hot days)	5,93
9	Classroom conditions in general are important for student learning	5,95
10	Important for learning is the availability of access to information about events held at the University	5,95

Source: Own research

Many studies have shown that student development depends on student well-being in the institution and student well-being is determined by various conditions that students identify as significant. Research by [Tripon et al. \(2023\)](#) shows that the way students perceive the state of their learning environment varies with the way they feel about the learning process. An improved environment predicts a higher level of well-being. Developing a motivating and supportive environment where students receive objective and fair evaluations for their efforts increases their health and academic achievement ([Tripon et al., 2023](#)). When the university environment responds effectively to students' needs, it enhances the quality of their education ([Kocot et al., 2024](#)).

If this is the case and the university has an aspiration to improve the quality of education of its students, then its interest in their needs increases.

The needs of students are dynamic. If yesterday, in many places around the world, they focused on material conditions and student initiatives, today their attention is focused on the relationship with their tutors and the knowledge they receive. Closely linked to their idea of gaining knowledge, they bring up all the indicators related to the acquisition of knowledge as important for themselves.

3. DISCUSSION

Today, we are witnessing a shift in students' needs and understandings of effective education. Having integrated the concept of sustainable development into their values, students are moving their criteria away from the material conditions of learning without distancing themselves from them definitively. At the same time, they reinforce the emphasis on the usefulness of knowledge and its direct link to their future fulfilment.

In a survey conducted in 2023 at the Technical University of Bulgaria among students studying social sciences, the 10 indicators that received the highest scores for relevance in education were related to whether the knowledge they receive at the university is useful for their development as professional; whether the curricula offered by the university are adequate for their specialty; whether it contains courses that would help them develop competencies in the specialty they have chosen in their career path; whether the teaching methods used by teachers help in the acquisition of practical skills and theoretical knowledge (Table 1). These and several other criteria directly aimed at their development as professionals are headed by one specific and obviously very important criterion in the minds of students. This is the criterion of the students - do they feel accepted in the university.

Placing such a criterion first among 74 other criteria directly related to the educational process and professional development shows something very important. Students are bringing the idea of professional training closer to the personal process of self-actualisation than before. They introduce criteria from the closest relationships with significant adults among the criteria for joining an educational environment. The association between the relationship of a child and their teacher with the child's relationship with their parent was noted as early as 2007 by [Hughes and Kwok \(2007\)](#), who found that the closer this association, the higher the achievement of students would be in subsequent years (p. 39). Similar to the principle of building relationships with significant adults in the family and with teachers in primary school, students choose whether or not to accept education depending on their perception of how the educational environment accepts and respects them.

This rise in the criterion - do they feel accepted at the university in the first place among all other criteria is confirmed in other studies. A study by [Wei and Ramalu \(2011\)](#), for example, shows that

students in Malaysia also value immaterial services more highly than material ones at university. Among all non-material conditions, their students also rank empathy and responsiveness of faculty and administrative staff highest among other satisfaction measures (p. 9). In 2009, Thompson (2009) wrote that the effectiveness of teaching and learning is directly related to students' perception of the attitude that the environment has towards them and the presence of respect. The relationship between responsiveness and students' learning satisfaction has also been found in the studies of Crompton and Mackay (1989), Parasuraman et al. (1991), Johnson et al. (2001), Ham (2003), Holdford and Patkar (2003), Kang and James (2004), Usman (2010), Sohail and Shaikh (2004).

The quality of relationships between people who share common spaces and relationships are critical elements of the issue of sustainability and according to Howarth (2012). A sustainable future, he believes, will be a reality when we succeed in building the kinds of institutions that support the necessary social conditions through which future generations will be able to define and achieve their conception of the good life (p. 38). Dabija et al.'s (2023) research shows that university sustainability is directly related to student loyalty; and that universities should increase their efforts to create a sustainable academic environment and continuously examine the factors influencing student loyalty (pp. 1858-1876).

The key importance of responsiveness, acceptance and respect is also identified by Meador (2023). Meador (2023) draws our attention to the fact that respect for students goes beyond the function of one-way treatment. Respect for the student predicts the development of the student's ability to treat those with whom they interact with respect (p. 1). What students demand from their teachers is not simply a desire for good treatment. It attracts a relationship of mutual respect that has a continuing influence on all their subsequent interactions. The importance of students' interactions with their professors and even with university administrative staff is confirmed in Chatterjee's (2011) research. She emphasizes the importance of how the interaction between academic and administrative staff, and the ability to provide open communication and support to motivate their students to develop their subordinate potential (Chatterjee, 2011, pp. 978-993).

Thompson's (2018) research shows that „showing respect is a central or dominant element of the ethics of care and a vital contributor to sustainable teacher-student and student-student relationships“ (p. 58). Thompson (2018) draws our attention to the fact that teachers' respect for their students predicts students' respect for their teachers (p. 58). The established pattern of respect for the other, while not a primary goal of learning in a particular subject area, appears to be an essential component of developing sustainable relationships with others.

The result of this study very much confirms the research of Thompson (2015), which shows that it is not the conditions of the macro-environment that determine the quality of the educational process, but the management of relationships within them (p. 3). Contemporary students leave material conditions to the side in determining the quality of education they receive. They put respect and acceptance first. By demanding it, they change the style of attitude of the higher education institution that seeks to meet the needs of its students. By stimulating teachers to a relationship of respect, students create an environment in which, as they study their major, they learn from their teachers the mutual respect that they will give a few years later to the people with whom they will work. Students seem to promote the development of an environment that transforms attitudes into relationships and involves them in decision-making. If this is one of the main pillars of sustainability today, it seems that integrated into the minds of students and carried over from the responsive relationship with their parents, it is being externalized into the educational relationship.

The pursuit of this extrapolation from the personal into all other forms of relationships ensures their affirmation in all relationships and continuation in future relationships. Therefore, such research shows not just the students' desire to be respected and accepted by their professors. It shows the contemporary principles of sustainability integrated into their consciousness, which they require to be applied in educational relationships.

4. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

This study shows trends of changing student values that seem to integrate the values of the concept of sustainable development. Moreover, This change seems to be driving another change - that of the university. As long as the higher education institution has the aspiration to meet the needs of its students, its change will depend on the change of the students and their values. I think this study and others like it point to a very interesting trend that can be followed up in future research. As we think about how to integrate the ideas of sustainability into the minds of students through higher education, it seems that already integrated into their minds, these principles are changing higher education. By forcing us to change, students make higher education sustainable.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that the ideas of sustainable development enter into the minds of students and through it they make the university join the ideas of sustainable education. Changed, the higher education environment provides not only professional knowledge but overall personal growth. Stimulated by students to provide responsiveness, the university environment forms relationships of mutual understanding with a high likelihood of continuation in future professional interactions. Thus, the organization of the university environment not only influences student well-being but simultaneously teaches a pattern of relating to others.

The university's overall engagement with the needs of students teaches students a commitment to those they will work with within their companies in the future. Consideration of students' needs develops in students the ability to understand relevant the needs of those with whom they will work in the future. Improving the environment as a result of understanding the needs of the students in it, teaches students the need to improve the environment when people need it. Learning through direct demonstration of commitment to students over many years in their lives, develops their abilities to be emotionally responsive to people's needs, to be concerned about their well-being, to participate in improving the conditions for their achievement, and to feel satisfaction in the opportunity to participate in this.

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