

Sustainability in Swiss Higher Education

**Summary of the study on the sustainability strategy
and inclusion of sustainability-related topics
in business and economics course studies**

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B,S,S. Volkswirtschaftliche Beratung

Commissioned by WWF Switzerland

Management summary

This study reveals the extent to which sustainable development is embedded in the strategies of Swiss traditional universities and universities of applied sciences and how much it is addressed in the teaching of business and economics courses. It is hoped that the report will boost implementation of the WWF's higher education strategy by shedding light on the importance that traditional universities and universities of applied sciences attach to the issue of sustainability. The study will serve as a basis for future impact measurements and for raising awareness among the wider professional public.

The information on how embedded sustainability is in the strategies of institutions of higher education comes from internet-based research, which was then largely verified by the institutions. The second part reveals the extent to which sustainability topics are part of the teaching of business and economics courses. For this purpose, the curricula coordinators at the respective institutions were asked to estimate how much sustainability is addressed in their compulsory lectures and how many students (proportion of the total number of students studying business and economics) attend optional modules on sustainable development.

The institutions are organised differently, preventing a direct comparison between the results on how embedded sustainability is at the strategic level. Strategies are not always defined at the level of the establishment as a whole, with some universities of applied sciences also delegating this task to their affiliated schools. Nevertheless, the data shows that the strategies of the institutions often include sustainability goals, designate people or offices responsible, and demonstrate other forms of commitment to sustainability. However, very few institutions have specific reporting and controlling processes for sustainability topics or measures based on them.

In the teaching of business and economics courses, some institutions address sustainability in their compulsory lectures, while others also look at it in specific optional modules. It is difficult at times to separate sustainability topics from other content because the institutions often follow an integrated approach in which sustainability is not mentioned explicitly, but is still addressed. Among the optional modules, the three with the highest student numbers were considered. These figures suggest that a majority of students are interested in the environment and sustainability and attend the corresponding lectures.

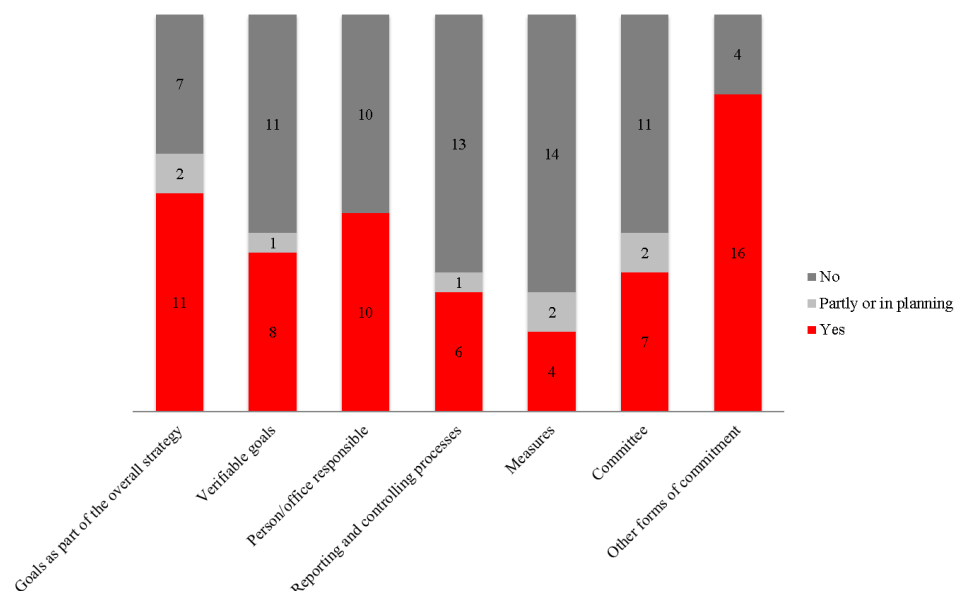
Sustainability strategy

The following questions were answered about the sustainability strategy:

- *Goals as part of the overall strategy:* Has the institution implemented visionary and strategic goals for sustainable development as part of its overall strategy?
- *Verifiable goals:* Are the defined goals clear and verifiable?
- *Person/office responsible:* Does the institution have a person or office responsible for sustainable development?
- *Reporting and controlling processes:* Does the institution have such processes and clear indicators for them?
- *Measures:* Are specific measures derived from the reporting and controlling processes?
- *Committee:* Does the institution have a mandated interdisciplinary committee for sustainable development?
- *Other forms of commitment:* Is the institution administration committed to sustainable development in some other way?

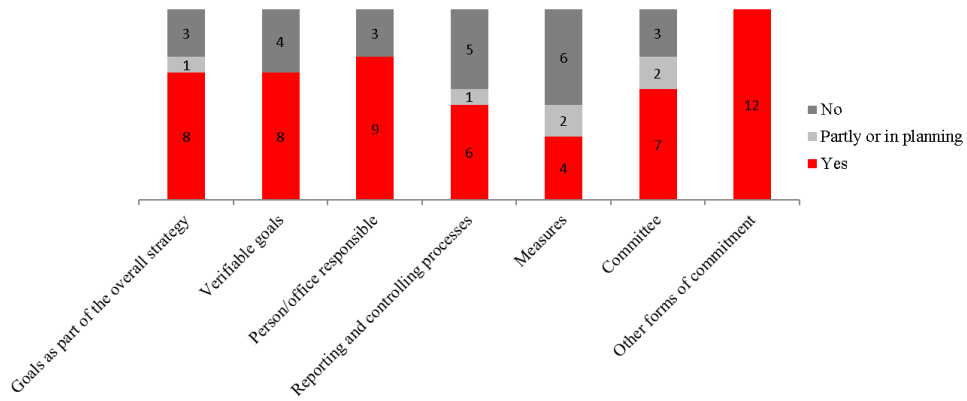
The responses were divided into three categories: “Yes”, “Partly” / “In planning” and “No”. The second category combines two possible answers as it is not clear whether a planned measure is better or worse than one which has only partly been implemented.

Implementation of the sustainability strategy at the 20 institutions of higher education

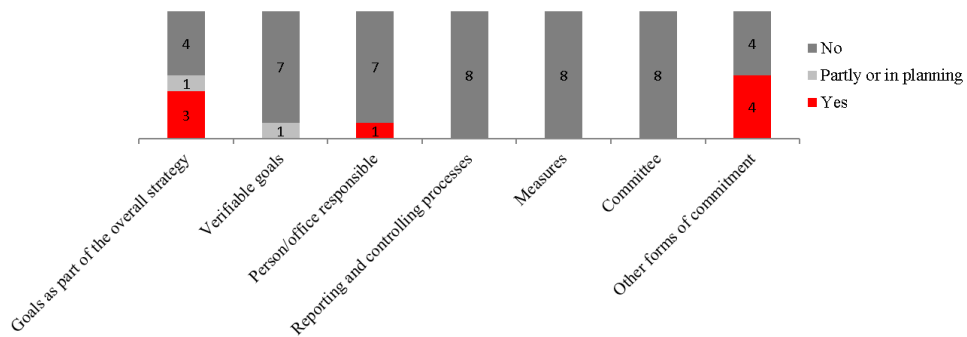


The traditional universities pay far more attention to sustainable development within their overall strategy than the universities of applied sciences. The latter tend to be decentralised and therefore (also) define strategies at the level of their affiliated schools.

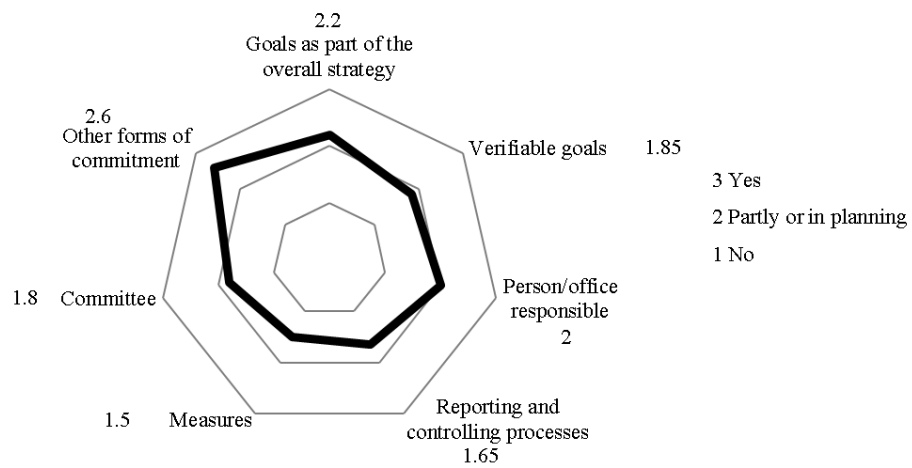
Sustainability strategies of the traditional universities (12)



Sustainability strategies of the universities of applied sciences (8)



Mean value for all the traditional universities and universities of applied sciences

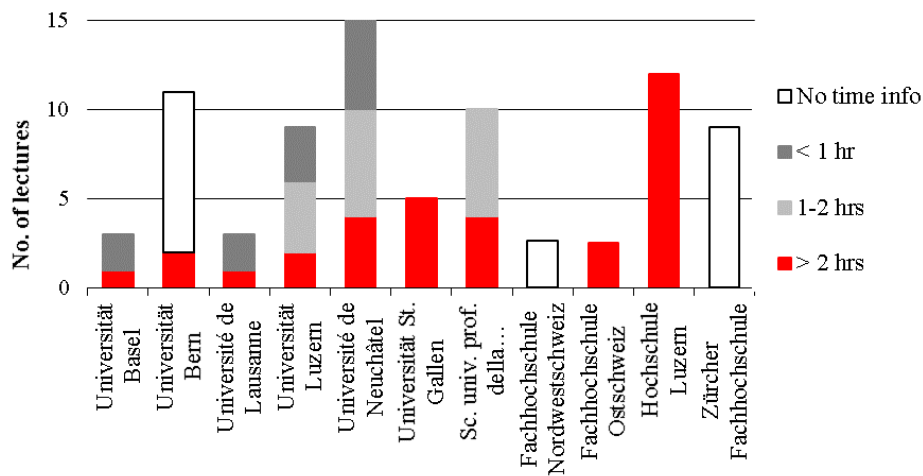


Sustainability in the teaching of business and economics course studies

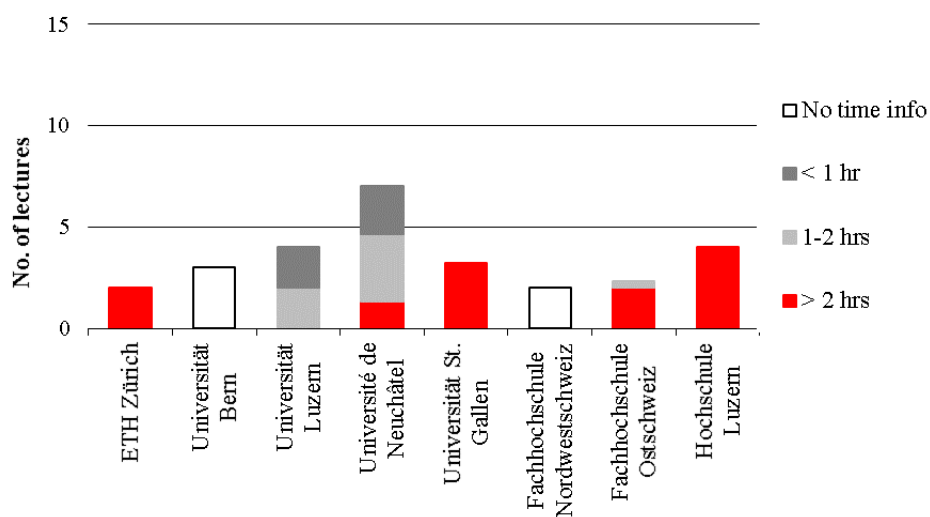
We are only looking at the ecological dimension of sustainability. The following were defined as relevant content for sustainability from the WWF's point of view:

- Environment, natural resources, climate, biodiversity
- Sustainable international economic policy
- Growth and sufficiency
- Sustainable energy consumption
- Sustainable consumption
- Externalities
- Sustainability concepts, management and goals
- Green investment / sustainable finance

Sustainability in compulsory modules - Bachelor

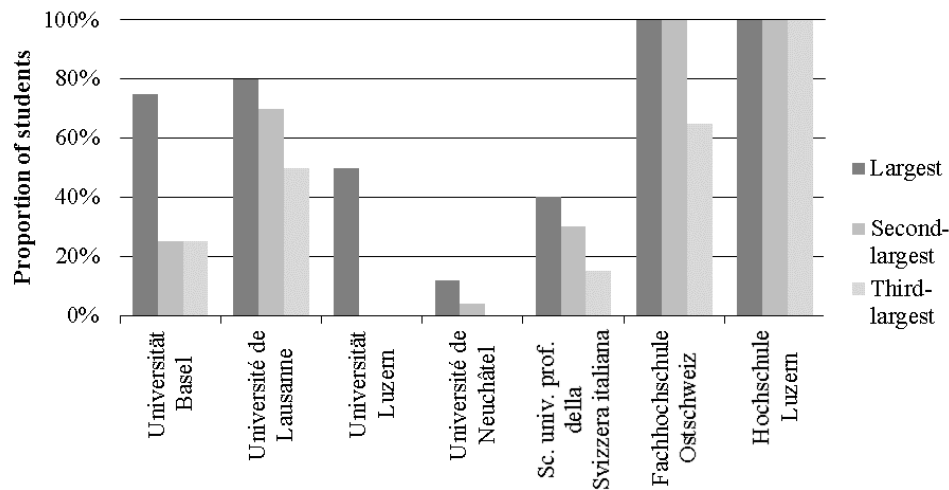


Sustainability in compulsory modules - Master



In addition, we asked the institutions to indicate how many students (or what proportion of students) attend optional sustainability lectures.

Attendance of the three largest sustainability modules



Assessment

In reference to the strategy employed by the institutions of higher education, it is evident that the approach to sustainability differs markedly. Strategies (including the sustainability strategy) at the traditional universities apply to the whole institution. Some universities of applied sciences, on the other hand, delegate the development and implementation of the strategy to their affiliated schools. This leads to considerable heterogeneity and little comparability between the institutions.

This survey shows that a few aspects (e.g. sustainability goals as part of the overall strategy, other forms of commitment to sustainability) are already widely adopted at the institutions (especially at the universities), while others (e.g. measures, reporting and controlling) are only implemented in a few cases.

Several institutions were unable or unwilling to answer the questions about the extent to which sustainability is embedded in the teaching. This can partly be explained by the effort involved and may also mean that relatively little importance is attached to this issue. By contrast, the attendance figures for the optional modules show that these are often very popular. This indicates that students are interested in an explicit focus on sustainability.

It is also important to mention that the views on how sustainability should be addressed in the teaching are very different. WWF Switzerland proposes an explicit

focus and specific examples, whereas several institutions state that business and economics courses fundamentally address sustainable development, or optimal use of scarce resources, even if they do not refer to this directly. What is more, the courses are geared towards imparting methodological skills which can then be applied in a whole range of areas. This application is offered, in turn, by the optional modules.

To keep the effort required of the institutions to a minimum, the survey focusses on the question of how much the ecological dimension of sustainability is addressed in the teaching. A precise account of the content was dispensed with as this would have significantly reduced the willingness to participate and the response rate. However, it would be interesting to build on this study by ascertaining whether individual aspects of sustainability receive particularly close attention and which are still neglected.



Sustainable institutions of higher education - Sustainable business and economics courses

Demands of WWF Switzerland

Importance and the current situation

As establishments educating the business leaders and academic experts of tomorrow, as think-tanks and innovation promoters, institutions of higher education and business schools have a pivotal role to play in the transformation into a Sustainable Economy and Society. Yet, this responsibility and opportunity is only partially being realised. Only a few of these institutions already focus on Sustainable Development, most notably on the sustainable use of natural resources.

Sustainable Development is far from embedded everywhere. In business and economics courses, in particular, which are extremely important for the paradigm shift in the economy, the paradigm of dominance of economic objectives and short-sighted profit optimisation still prevails in research and teaching. Alongside “neoclassical theory” barely any other basic theory is taught, and students receive little encouragement to think critically. There are certainly a number of optional special modules on sustainability and the environment, but the principles, aspects and approaches of a Sustainable Economy often receive only marginal attention, if any, in the compulsory economics and business administration courses. What is more, there is often no practical relevance, which makes it highly difficult to develop genuine skills.

The current situation at Switzerland’s twenty traditional universities and universities of applied sciences has been surveyed by WWF Switzerland (see www.wwf.ch/hochschulen). It is calling on people in charge of policy, strategy and operation to demonstrate a reinforced commitment to Sustainable Development at institutions of higher education. It will survey the situation again in two to three years and publish the results.

Eight concrete demands

Political and strategic management of the institutions

Demand made to cantons and federal government as providers of funding for the institutions:

1. Sustainable Development requirements in the performance mandates of institutions of higher education
The performance mandates of the institutions will include clear and binding sustainability goals - especially for managing natural resources. These will be checked regularly, and the measures will be reviewed and revised, if necessary.

Demand made to the Swiss University Conference and Swissuniversities:

2. Strategic Sustainability Programme for institutions of higher education
A joint programme will be launched to promote the Sustainable Development of the institutions. This will cover all areas of the institutions: teaching, research, services, building/operation, funding. It will support the institutions with financial and human resources and will ensure coordination and the transfer of know-how.

Sustainability strategy and management of the institutions

Demands made to the administrations of institutions of higher education:

3. Sustainability strategy
Every institution will develop a clear sustainability strategy. This will set binding goals and cover all areas of the institution: teaching, research, services, building/operation, funding.
4. Sustainability management
Every institution will develop efficient Sustainability Management. This will cover action planning, implementation, controlling, reporting, further development and the provision of financial and human resources.
5. Responsibility within the administration
Strategic responsibility for Sustainability will rest with a member of the institution's administration. This person will be supported by specialists (Sustainability Managers or Team) and a professional body (Sustainability Council).

Teaching in business and economics courses

Demands made to those responsible for teaching in business and economics course of studies:

6. Sustainable economy topics in all course of studies
The relevant topics and aspects of a sustainable economy will be addressed as key subjects in all compulsory modules, and these will be supplemented with elective modules focussing on sustainability. The required financial and human resources will be provided.
7. Competent and committed lecturers
The lecturers will acquire the Sustainable Development content relevant to their discipline and modules. They will be committed to further developing this and to coordinating the goals and content with other modules.
With appointments and teaching assignments, people will be chosen who have advanced knowledge of sustainability topics.
8. Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methods
Interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary and practical formats and methods will guarantee a holistic understanding of Sustainable Development and a real-world focus. They will encourage students to think critically and reflect, and will enable them to put what they have learnt into practice.

WWF also supports the demands of the Union of Students of Switzerland:
<https://www.vss-unes.ch/positionen/nachhaltigkeit/> (German)

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