

ISCN 2018 / Breakout Session #4: Networks for Innovation / Summary

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Strategic Networking for Sustainability: Insights from Research and Practice

Higher education institutions (HEIs) increasingly discern their role and capacity as important societal actors to address sustainability problems. We elaborated how networks, linking HEIs on national and international level, can help to jointly utilize already existing expertise and jointly foster innovation to advance efforts towards sustainability. We departed from insights gained from two German case studies:

- a) Within the research project *Sustainability at HEIs* a national network is currently launched to improve the visibility of the already existing sustainability expertise at German HEIs and to facilitate mutual knowledge exchange as well as future collaborations within and across different HEIs. Along four approaches on four different levels we demonstrated how a single HEI can exactly contribute to the establishment of this network:
 - (1) National level: Invite vice presidents of all 399 German HEIs to the network
 - (2) HEI-level: Invite the president, researchers and lecturers, administration staff and students to the network
 - (3) Level of research group: Make current sustainability expertise of German HEIs explicit & visible by providing profound information based on empirical research and good practice examples;
 - (4) Individual level: Become a member of the network and make use of it yourself.

- b) *The University Alliance for Sustainability* was founded in 2015. It links five strategic partner universities on three different continents to foster sustainability within research, teaching, 3rd mission and campus management. In the case study we evaluated how a single university benefits from being a member in this network:
 - (1) Governance: Network membership includes the commitment of the HEI leadership. Therefore, it provides leverage to those representing the network at their HEI, increases awareness of the topic sustainability and serves as lobby for implementing innovative ideas.
 - (2) Teaching: The best practice exchange on sustainability teaching and learning concepts pushed and informed the development of an inter- and transdisciplinary sustainability curriculum open to B.A. students from all faculties at Freie Universität Berlin.
 - (3) Innovation: The network membership brought planned and unintended outcomes. The latter clearly shows the power of the network – the UAS brought stakeholders together that would otherwise not have met, providing impetus to new activities beyond the scope of the network.

In the subsequent interactive session participants discussed their expectations towards HEI-networks for sustainability. For them the overall prospect of network membership was to create new contacts as well as to get inspiration for sustainability-related innovations at their own HEI.

More specifically participants were expecting to exchange best practice examples, success factors as well as to learn on implementation opportunities.

Our session concluded with a collection of leverage points to advance HEI-networks and to strategically use them to foster sustainability at your HEI. For the future advancement of existing HEI-networks external feedback and internal peer-review-procedures were suggested to allow self-reflection as well as to secure quality standards and efficacy. Another recommendation was to strategically win HEIs with high international reputation as members for networks. On the individual HEI-level participants suggested to particularly mind the multiplicity of exchange opportunities and to concentrate on active participation in selected networks.

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