

T07W03 / Governing Sustainability Transitions: Higher Education Institutions as Policy Actors in ESD Implementation

Topic : T07 / Policy Implementation

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CALL FOR PAPERS

Governing Sustainability Transitions: Higher Education Institutions as Policy Actors in ESD Implementation

We invite scholars, practitioners, and policy analysts to submit paper proposals for a workshop exploring how higher education institutions (HEIs) act as dynamic policy actors in advancing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), moving beyond their traditional role as knowledge transmitters to become laboratories of innovation and systemic change. While global frameworks such as UN SDG 4.7 and national strategies like Germany's National Action Plan set ambitious ESD goals, a persistent gap remains between policy design and on-the-ground implementation in higher education. Despite growing adoption of innovative practices, these efforts remain under-theorized in public policy literature, limiting our understanding of how HEIs function as sites of sustainability governance.

This workshop seeks empirically grounded and theoretically informed contributions that examine how HEIs translate sustainability commitments into action through governance innovation, pedagogical experimentation, and cross-sectoral collaboration. We welcome papers that investigate interconnected mechanisms such as:

- Service learning, which links academic inquiry with community-based sustainability action;
- Student-led micro-projects, which foster civic agency and serve as sites of policy prototyping;
- Whole-institution approaches, which embed sustainability across governance, operations, teaching, and research; and
- Green Offices, which act as strategic coordination hubs that translate global norms into local practice.

Increasingly, these initiatives are mediated by technology and EdTech platforms that enable collaboration, data transparency, and scalability, yet also raise critical questions about equity, data governance, and epistemic diversity. We encourage critical analyses of how digital infrastructures shape (or constrain) democratic, justice-oriented ESD.

We particularly welcome comparative, multi-scalar, and interdisciplinary perspectives that address tensions between managerial efficiency and transformative learning, and that examine how HEIs navigate multi-level policy environments, from campus operations to urban sustainability plans and international frameworks.

Papers may address, but are not limited to, the following questions:

- How do institutional governance models in HEIs shape the design, implementation, and evaluation of ESD policy?
- Under what policy conditions do intermediary structures (such as Green Offices or digital platforms) effectively mediate between international sustainability frameworks and local institutional practice?
- How can pedagogical innovations like service learning and micro-projects be institutionalized as legitimate policy instruments that inform university strategy and external sustainability governance?
- What mechanisms enable campus-based ESD innovations to scale beyond the university and influence municipal, national, or transnational sustainability policy agendas?

We especially encourage submissions from the Global South and early-career researchers. Accepted

papers will contribute to advancing public policy theory and practice at the intersection of higher education, sustainability governance, and institutional change, offering actionable insights for university leaders, national ministries, and international organizations working to turn ESD commitments into transformative reality.

Please submit a 300-word abstract that highlights the research question(s), methodology, expected outcomes of your contribution. Please also share a short biographical note along with the abstract.

ABSTRACT

This workshop examines how higher education institutions (HEIs) act as dynamic policy actors in advancing Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), moving beyond their traditional role as knowledge transmitters to become laboratories of innovation and systemic change. While global frameworks such as UN-SDG 4.7 and national strategies like Germany's National Action Plan set ambitious ESD goals, a persistent gap remains between policy design and implementation in higher education. The workshop addresses this gap by analyzing how HEIs operationalize ESD through interconnected mechanisms: service learning that links academic inquiry with community-based sustainability action, student-led micro-projects that foster civic agency and policy prototyping, whole-institution approaches that embed sustainability across governance, operations, teaching, and research, and Green Offices that serve as strategic coordination hubs. Increasingly, these efforts are mediated by technology and EdTech platforms that enable collaboration, data transparency, and scalability, yet also raise critical questions about equity, data governance, and epistemic diversity. Despite their growing adoption, these practices remain under-theorized in policy literature. This workshop brings together scholars, sustainability officers, and policy analysts to explore how institutional governance, intermediary structures, pedagogical innovations, and digital infrastructures shape ESD outcomes across diverse contexts. Through comparative case studies and mixed-methods research, participants will test hypotheses concerning policy coherence, multi-level governance, and the conditions under which campus-based sustainability initiatives influence broader policy ecosystems. The workshop aims to reposition HEIs as active agents in sustainability transitions, with direct relevance for university leaders, national ministries, and international organizations seeking to translate ESD commitments into transformative practice. This workshop is firmly grounded in the theme of policy implementation, examining how global and national ESD commitments are translated, adapted, or contested within HEI through governance structures, intermediary mechanisms, and pedagogical practices. It addresses implementation challenges including capacity, coherence, institutional agency, and the role of technology in bridging policy ambition and practice.