

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: AN EXPLORATION

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Abstract

The world is passing through the worst crisis of its existence nowadays. It is true that the last two centuries have witnessed unprecedented progress on account of the advent of science. The desire for a better lifestyle and comfort has pushed men to exploit the earth. Natural resources which sustain our life are depleting fast. Our forests are shrinking, air, water and land are polluted. Animals and plants which form part of the food chain are vanishing. We are living in challenging times. The challenge encompasses the tremendous environmental degradation, escalating economic impacts of environmental issues, regulation and policy changes and the consequent need for compliance. Time is short and we really need to multiply the scale and complexity of our efforts to survive. It's here that education institutes have a critical role to play that is, equipping graduates with right set of knowledge, skills and attitude to address the issues of sustainability. Indeed, the curriculum needs a renewal to match the pace of societal progress.

Key Words: Higher Education, Sustainable Development, Society, Academics

Literature Review

Lozano et al (2013) propose that higher education has, since times immemorial, played a very vital role in bringing about societal transformation by educating business leaders, decision-makers, entrepreneurs and academics. It is a well-known fact, but unfortunately not a well-researched aspect. Desha and Hargroves (2014) assert that the planetary crisis that we face today is actually a crisis of education. Martin and Jucker (2005) assert that educational institutes, by virtue of the fact that they educate the masses and create people who manage the institutions of the society, share the onus to create awareness, knowledge, technologies and tools to create an environmentally sustainable future by creating a sensitized and aware workforce. Sustainable development has for long been a political agenda, but not an educational agenda. The institutes are also expected to play a dominant role in espousing the cause of sustainability (Chalkley, 2006). UNESCO (2006) reiterates that there is a worldwide recognition of the fact that the pace at which we are growing is not environmentally sustainable and awareness, education, and training of the masses is the only way to move the society towards sustainability. As reported by Walter Erdelen, Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences, UNESCO in a UNESCO report "Higher education institutions play a strategic role in finding solutions to today's leading challenges in the fields of health, science, education, renewable energy, water management, food security and the environment. We need higher education institutions to train teachers in the conduct of pedagogical research and develop relevant curricula that integrates the values of sustainable development".

Education in general, and especially management education, has a bigger role to play in the entire scheme of things. Alcaraz, Thiruvattal, and Escudero (2010), advocate that management grads equipped with business education are expected to make business decisions, which would have far

reaching effect on sustainability-economic, social and environmental. Hence, sensitizing them on issues of sustainability is an urgent global priority (Littledyke, Manolas, and Littledyke, 2013). Doing this is not a matter of choice, it is a priority. Higher education is expected to lead the so called 'green movement' (Weissman, 2012). Institutes of higher education should champion the cause of sustainability by demonstrating their commitment by actually reducing the global warming emissions and incorporating sustainability into their curriculum. This would create an ethically conscious civil society (The American College and University Presidents' Climate Commitment, 2012).

Literature abounds in findings that the curriculum has slowed down, but there is a huge gap in literature that proposes how the acceleration can be achieved. Leiserowitz and Fernandez (2008) assert that an interdisciplinary study with social sciences as the mainstay, is needed to raise issues of values, ethics and culture, which are the cornerstones of humanity. Rhodes (2006) suggested that sustainability is an attempt to formulate the policies (social and economic) in order to preserve the earth's available resources with minimum disruption to flora and fauna, inhabitants and environments and pointed out that liberal arts education is important in the teaching of sustainability. Emphasis on liberal education, interdisciplinary focus, diversity and civics can help address the sustainability issue (Sherren, 2008). Ter Horst and Pearce (2010) suggest that foreign language could also be an agent of integration in comprehending the meaning and practice of sustainability across global collaborative communities.

Objectives of Research

The proposed research aims at finding out

- a. The current level of comprehension that prevails in higher education institutes, with respect to sustainability;
- b. Is it feasible to have a uniform code of conduct for the society in order to attain sustainability?
- c. How can higher education institutes integrate sustainability into the curriculum and become more responsible towards the cause of sustainability?

Research Methodology

The research involved both Exploratory and Descriptive research.

Exploratory Research

The exploratory research was undertaken to have a better understanding of the research problem and the variables involved. It included the following:

- a. Literature review is done on the discipline of sustainability and morality;
- b. Focus group discussion with select scholars from academics and practice who enjoy an acclaim in the area of sustainable development.

The insights drawn from the exploratory stage, helped as an input in the Descriptive Phase of the research.

Descriptive Research

Descriptive Research involved seeking primary data from higher education students. The study is based on primary data collected from the students pursuing PGDM (Post Graduate Diploma in Management) from the private B-Schools located in Rajasthan and NCR. The students belonged to

both first and second year of the PGDM program.

Measurement Instrument

The questionnaire had close-ended questions designed in sync with the theoretical constructs and the inputs received from the focus group discussion with experts.

Sample Size

100 questionnaires

Sampling Method

The sample was drawn using a simple random sampling method.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

The data was collected online using google doc. The link was sent to the respondents and the responses thus obtained were analyzed using MS-Excel. The questionnaire was administered to the respondents in the months of November, 2019-January, 2020.

Data Analysis and Findings

Higher Education Students

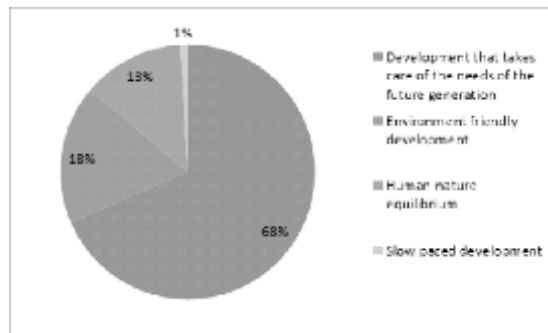


Figure 1: What do you understand by sustainable development?

The above figure 1 indicates the following:

- 68% of the higher education students understand sustainable development as development that takes care of the needs of the future generation.
- 18 % feel that sustainable development is environment friendly development.
- 13% assign human-nature equilibrium as the meaning of sustainable development.
- 1% of the respondents define sustainable development as slow paced development.

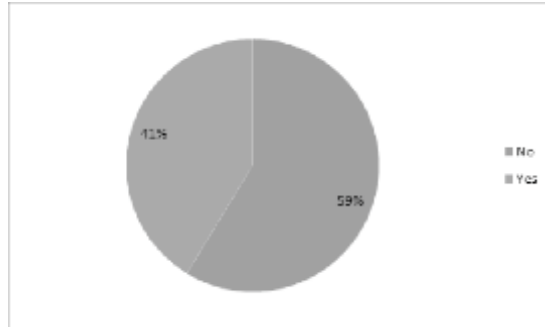


Figure 2: Do you feel that we are surviving in a sustainable world?

The figure 2 indicates the following:

- Only 41% of Higher Education students feel that we are living in a sustainable world, while 59% feel that we are living in an unsustainable world.

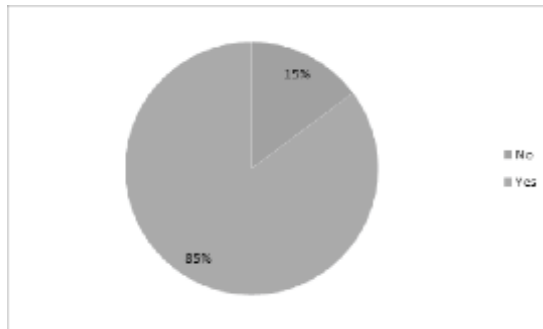


Figure 3: Do you think that sustainability can be taught in college?

The figure 3 indicates the following:

- Only a meager 15% of Higher Education students are of the view that sustainability cannot be taught, while 85% are hopeful that sustainability can be taught.

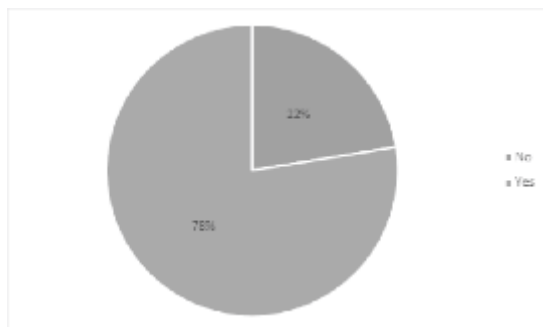


Figure 4: Is there any course on Sustainability?

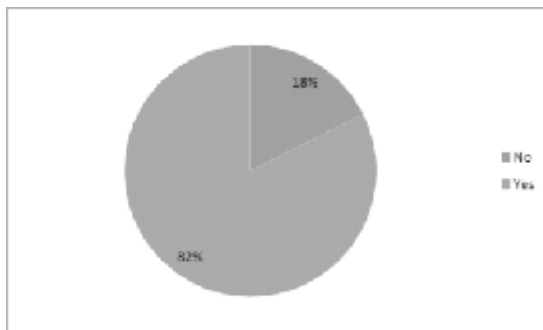


Figure 5: Do you feel that there is a decline in the moral values of your generation?

The figure 5 indicates the following:

- 82% of the Higher Education students feel that there is a decline in the moral values of the current generation, while 18% of the higher education students are averse to the opinion that there is a decline in the moral values of the current generation.

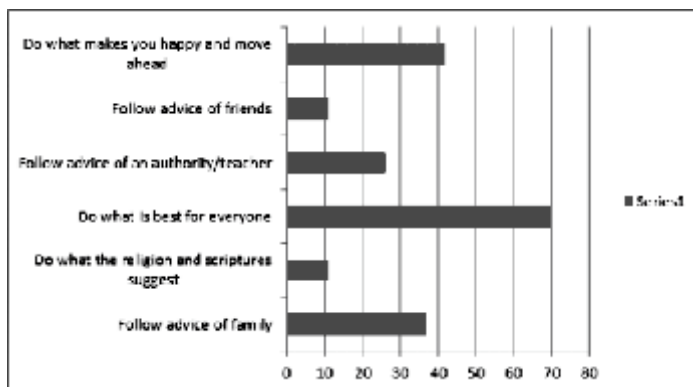


Figure 6: In making choices, if you are ever unsure of what is right or wrong in a situation, how do you decide what to do?

The figure 6 indicates the following:

- In the event of a moral dilemma, the higher education students do what is best for everyone. This is followed by doing what makes them happy and moving ahead. Advice from family follows next, advice of authority/ teacher follows next, followed by advice from friends. Least followed is what the religion and scriptures suggest.

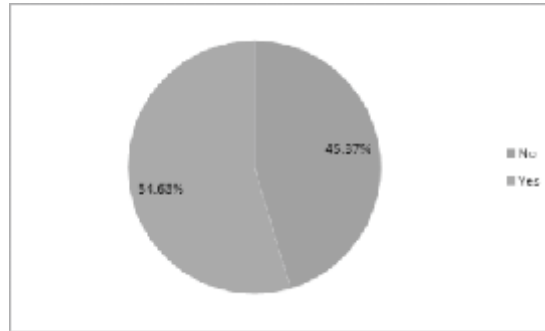


Figure 7: Do you have ethics/moral science/value education as a formal subject in the college?

The figure 7 indicates the following:

- 54.63% higher education students confirm that they have formal courses on moral science/value education and ethics, while 45.37% confirm that they do not have formal courses on moral science/value education and ethics.

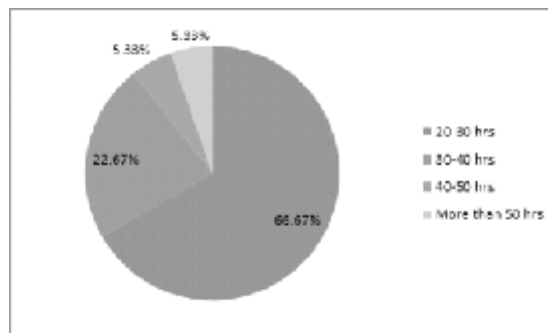


Figure 8: If yes, how many hours is ethics/moral science/value education taught in a year?

The figure 8 indicates the following:

- 66.67% higher education students confirm that moral science/value education/ethics is taught for 20-30 hours.
- 22.67% higher education students confirm that moral science/value education/ethics is taught for 30-40 hours.
- 5.33% higher education students confirm that moral science/value education/ethics is taught for 40-50 hours.
- 5.33% higher education students confirm that moral science/value education/ethics is taught for more than 50 hours.
- No response is achieved for teaching for less than 10 hours.

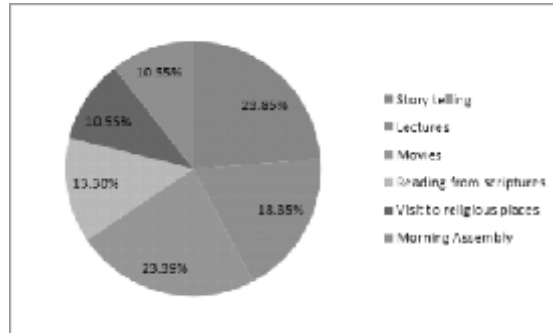


Figure 9: What other activities do you have to compensate and compliment for moral science/value education?

The figure 9 indicates the following:

The measures adopted in order to compensate and compliment for value education in the order of decreasing importance is

- Story Telling
- Movies
- Lectures
- Reading from Scriptures
- Morning assembly
- Visit to religious places

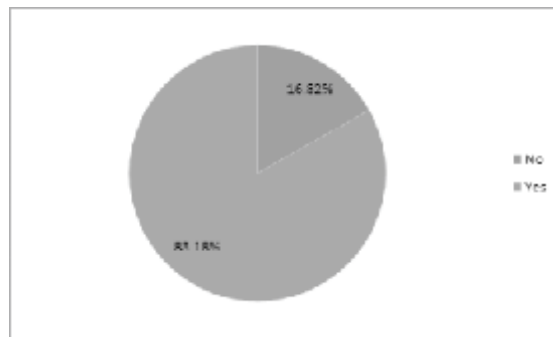


Figure 10: Do you think that having moral science/value education as a formal subject in the college can instill moral values in you?

The figure 10 indicates the following:

83.18 % of the higher education students believe that formal courses on values/ethics/moral science can instill moral values in an incumbent, while 16.82% respondents do not believe thus.

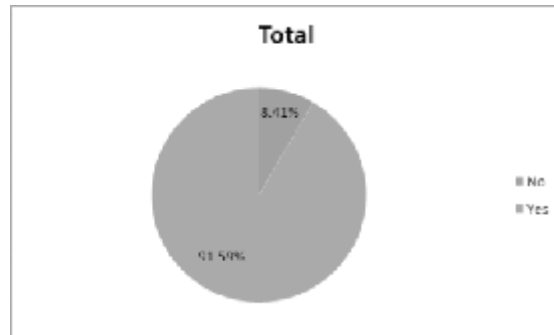


Figure 11: Do you think moral values in students shall lead to sustainable world and society?

The figure 11 indicates the following:

- A whopping 91.59% higher education students believe that moral values in a student can lead to a sustainable world and society, while a meager 8.41 % believe that it is not thus.

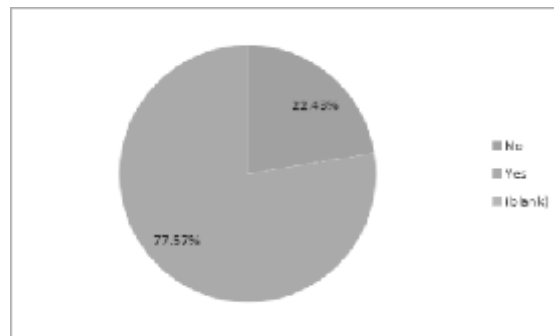


Figure 12: Do you think that there can be a uniform moral code of conduct for the society for sustainable development?

The figure 12 indicates the following:

77.57% of higher education students believe that there can be uniform moral code of conduct for the society for sustainable development, while 22.43% of the respondents do not agree with this.

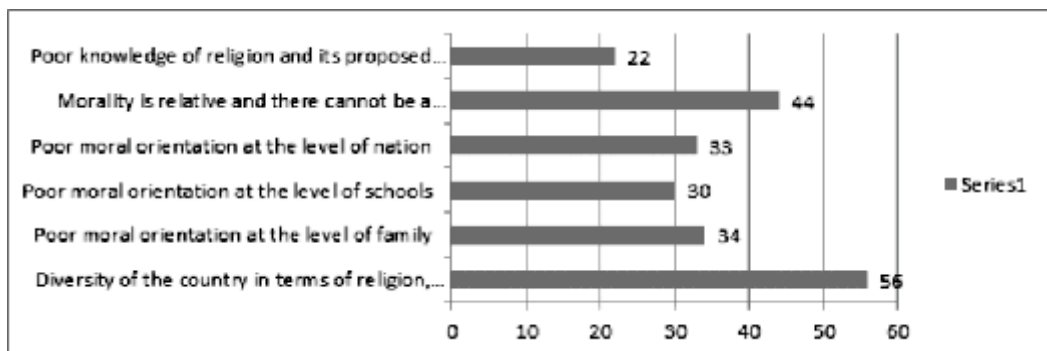


Figure 13: What could be the difficulties in having a common moral code of conduct for the society?

The figure 13 indicates the following:

As per the higher education faculty, the difficulties encountered in having a moral code of conduct for the society in the order of decreasing importance are as follows:

- Diversity of the country
- Morality is relative and thus there cannot be a common code of conduct
- Poor moral orientation at the level of family
- Poor moral orientation at the level of nation
- Poor moral orientation at the level of schools
- Poor knowledge of religion and its proposed values

Recommendations

- Literature review suggests that higher education can and should address the cause of sustainability. It also indicates education has the potential to influence the future decision makers, policy formulators and policy implementers and thus sensitization, education, training and research undertaken in institutes of higher education can give an impetus to sustainability in all its forms and manifestations.
- The current study began with an introspection of what is the current understanding of B-school students towards the meaning of sustainable development. The encouraging fact is that 68% of the higher education students understand sustainable development as development that takes care of the needs of the future generation. This is indeed the most precise and accurate definition of sustainability that takes care of the current generation and the generation to come. The comprehension, thus, is correct amongst the management grads.
- More students believe that we are living in an unsustainable world than those who believe that we are living in a sustainable world. This may be perceptual though, but is important for a realization of the magnitude of the problem.
- Most students believe that sustainability can be taught in a B-school. This is a major shift as erstwhile literature reveals that only engineering, energy and environmental sciences institutes were considered to be areas where sustainability education could create an impact.
- Most institutes have a formal course on sustainability. This indeed is encouraging and indicates that higher education institutes are not existing in vacuum. They are quite in alignment with the issue of sustainability and are doing their bit by way of curriculum design and delivery. Realization of the responsibility has already taken place, but the momentum needs to be increased to see the light of the day.
- Students agree with the fact that there is a steep moral decline in the existing generation. Values, ethics have been relegated to a corner and this has a definite bearing on behavior of sustainability. If ethics, values are in place then unsustainable behaviors shall automatically be checked and a sustainable world with empathy, love, peace, wellbeing of all shall be attained. Formal courses on morals and values or may be a focus on the same through

special student driven cells can help the cause.

- A uniform code of conduct can of course lead to sustainability, but looking at the vast diversity inherent in a country like India, it seems unachievable. Nonetheless, small concerted efforts in the right direction can help achieve the tall order.

Conclusion

Achieving sustainability is a universal mandate and education institutes have an undeniably prominent role to play. Literature suggests that the institutes have realized this and are gearing up towards it. The courses and the curriculum have now been vocal on issues of sustainability, but execution is still a challenge. Realization is good, but enough. The curriculum at institutes of higher education needs a revamp to commit itself to the cause of sustainability.

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