

POSSIBILITIES OF IMPLEMENTING SUSTAINABILITY MANAGEMENT IN EDUCATIONAL AND PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

The present paper represents a complex theoretical-practical approach, focused on elucidating the possibilities of implementing sustainability management in higher education institutions and in the public health system. Just as sustainability represents a fundamental premise in the creation of the green economy, a valence of the EU-2030 Agenda, we believe that public institutions must, in turn, align their policies, action plans, with the approach of achieving sustainability. The purpose of the research is to highlight the possibilities of implementing sustainability management in higher education institutions and those in the public health system. The objectives of the research are: researching of conceptual approaches regarding sustainability management; elucidating the methods of achieving sustainability in public institutions; highlighting the specifics of sustainability management in institutions in the public system; highlighting the challenges of implementing sustainability management in public institutions. The general hypothesis of the research is H_0 : sustainability management is the fundamental factor for increasing the competitiveness of higher education institutions and public institutions. The epicenter of the research was based on the theoretical research of the main aspects of sustainability management, complemented by the empirical one, focused on the research of the main challenges in the implementation of sustainability management in public institutions. As a research method, we used content analysis, analyzing the official reports of public institutions, which allowed us to evaluate the possibilities of implementing sustainability management in public institutions. In the conclusions, we can reiterate that sustainability management is the fundamental pillar of ensuring the competitiveness of the economy, basic premises in the creation of the green economy. Thus, as a result, we believe that institutions in the public system must urgently implement sustainability management, which will help them become competitive, credible, attractive on the national market, as well as on the international one. Aligning policies, activities, public institutions with the approach of achieving sustainability, will help public institutions to increase their strategic competitiveness, notoriety, as well as to increase consumer trust in the services offered.

Keywords: *sustainability management; higher education institution; sustainability assessment; public health.*

JEL Classification: Q01, Q56, I23.

1. DEFINITION OF SUSTAINABILITY

The dynamism and turbulence that characterizes the activity environment of higher education institutions as well as the public health institutions require the application of safe, concrete measures in order to achieve sustainability through the prism of capitalizing on human potential, in the context of the innovative changes that occur daily. The need for higher education institutions and those in the public health system to be competitive, sustainable, derives from the increase in competitive pressure, from the need to align with international standards, in order to attract students to higher education institutions, on the one hand, and treating patients to the highest standards, on the other. Thus, sustainability in higher education institutions and within the institutions of the public health system must be nurtured at a fast pace, ensuring the promotion of economic, social and environmental equity.

The topicality of the research question resides in the need for universities and medical institutions to outline a safe route to sustainability, which can only be ensured by applying sustainability management in the context of innovative changes punctuated by the new framework. The universities of the Republic of Moldova are faced, along with other higher education institutions abroad, with multiple problems and challenges that they must deal with daily, finding tangible solutions that could provide them with a firm path to competitiveness.

This work represents a theoretical-practical substantiation of the defining aspects of sustainability management, focused on human potential as a decisive factor in ensuring sustainability in higher education institutions.

The need to research these aspects is imperative, because together with the desire to connect to international standards, together with the need to face the requirements put forward by professional bodies from abroad, the need to form a theoretical-applicative basis, to substantiate the innovation field, which can only be shaped with the help of capitalizing on the innovative culture of young specialists, contributing to the formation of the innovative potential of the higher education institution.

Postmodern education with its directions (e-learning, e-tutoring, life-long-learning, responsible education, sustainable education, distance education, etc.) can break stereotypes, stimulate the generation of innovations, facilitate the educational process, and can also increase its efficiency, but also the competitiveness of higher education institutions.

We believe that the main tool that higher education institutions along with the institutions in the public health system can capitalize on in the cultivation of postmodern education is the development of the human potential of teachers, students, researchers, and the awareness of their connection to the new demands of postmodern society.

The researcher Costel Istrate, professor at the UAIC university of Iasi, in his work "Sustainability in higher education – models, declarative intentions,

achievements, evaluation and proposals for action”, mentions that sustainability and sustainable development are terms that he will use in the same context in his work (Istrate, 2019, p. 37).

According to the expert on sustainability, the director of the Institute of Corporate Governance and Sustainability, within the UAIC, Agheorghiesei-Corodeanu, the concept of sustainability, originating from the English language, was adapted in the Romanian area with the notion of “sustainable development”. According to the researcher “sustainable development is a dynamic process, of achieving balance on the 3 dimensions: economic, social, environmental, while sustainability is an output of sustainable development, a result obtained by companies/institutions that align with the sustainable development process (Onofrei and Agheorghiesei, 2019, p. 13).

If we were to make an analysis of the practical applicability of the concepts of *sustainability*, *continuous development*, *sustainable development*, in the higher education system, then we can note that all the commissions, centers, institutes, student associations that are concerned with the issues of aligning institutions of higher education to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, from higher education institutions abroad, have taken over the concept of sustainability.

At the same time, analyzing the alignment of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Romania, we can note that the university uses the concept of *sustainable development* to report the efforts made by the university in the alignment of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Therefore, within the university, both the section on the university website and the report published by the university use the concept of sustainable development (UBB, 2023).

2. RESEARCHING THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABILITY

Researching the conceptual framework of sustainability, we can mention that Glavic and Lukman (2007), in their works, examined the term sustainability where they point out that “the earth belongs to each generation during its existence, which belongs to it fully and in its entirety, no generation can make higher debts than can be paid during its own existence” (Glavic and Lukman, 2007). Interpreting the researchers’ approach, we stipulate that sustainability implies the need to consume responsibly, to show strategic concerns regarding the well-being of future generations, who have the right to live in a better society. Each generation is responsible for its consumption, its behaviour towards itself and its stakeholders. Thus, it follows that sustainability implies a corporate responsibility that everyone must demonstrate in order to achieve sustainability.

In the same context, Brawn mentions that “sustainability is the concept that encapsulates the supporting capacity and has long been used by biologists, and until now has only rarely been considered by economists”. The time has come when economists, and not only them, must consider the “supporting capacity” of

resources for carrying out any activity regardless of the organization in which it is carried out (Simonis, 2008).

At the same time, Ellis (2003) in his studies, elucidates that sustainability is “the doctrine of urgency by which development and economic progress must take place and be maintained over time, within the limits established by ecology in the broadest sense – through the interdependence of human beings and their jobs, the biosphere and the laws of physics and chemistry that govern it. It follows that environmental protection and economic development are indeed antagonistic processes” (Ellis, 2003). From the interpretation of the conceptual approach, we specify that the researcher understands by sustainability a cooperation between economic well-being and the development of the society, an effective interaction between the economic, social and environmental aspects. Thus, if we want to demonstrate sustainable behavior, we must be concerned with ensuring a balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainability. Although achieving balance often seems unattainable, however, applying effective levers, principles and methods could support achieving the desired balance.

In addition, Muscoe (2005), approaches sustainability from the perspective of *retaining or supporting from the bottom*. “A community must be supported from the bottom – by current and future residents. Some places, through their specific combination of physical, cultural and perhaps spiritual characteristics, inspire people to care for their community. These are the places where sustainability has the greatest chance of existence” (Muscoe, 2005). From the sustainability approach, we can reiterate the need to strengthen efforts, at the level of the entire society, from the bottom up, in order to ensure a better future, through the prism of the concerns expressed to ensure the economic-social-environmental balance.

The researcher Somerville, Williams (2015), deals with sustainability from the perspective of the results, the performances generated by it. Thus, the researcher reiterates that “sustainability is more of a process than a result. In fact, one member of the sustainable city agenda committee stated that the major concept of sustainability is: [...] a journey, not a destination” (Somerville, Williams, 2015). Interpreting the essence of the sustainability approach, we can see that sustainability is not a result, but more than that, it is a dynamic process, a complex approach, which manifests implications at the level of the functioning of systems in order to ensure balance. Sustainability is a journey, so it is a process that manifests and involves several actors, stakeholders, who can positively influence the achievement of sustainability through responsible behavior, through rational consumption, through the prism of concerns for the future of society, the environment.

On the other hand, Tavanti (2010), in his studies, mentions that “sustainability is nothing but “meeting the needs of the present without

compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. In practice, sustainability is a collective concern for the well-being of our children and future generations” (Tavanti, 2010). Interpreting the approach, we discover that the researcher focuses, in the foreground, on the concerns expressed by the present generation to secure the future, in order to create better conditions for future generations. This approach is a complex one, given the fact that it involves the efforts of the entire society in ensuring the economic-social-environmental balance.

In our opinion, *sustainability represents the process of ensuring development and progress, in the context of ensuring a balance between ecological security, social equity and economic well-being, through which present generations do not disrupt the access of future generations to resources and show responsible behavior towards the future.* We believe that the approach to achieving sustainability is complex, difficult, but achievable through consolidated efforts at the level of society, which can be materialized through rational consumption, through effective activities to reduce the negative impact on the environment.

In order to create a sustainable university, it is necessary to reorganize the education system in order to insert the objectives related to sustainability in the daily activities of the universities, along with the integration of sustainability in the fields of research and education, which will focus on the training of skills linked to sustainability (Agheorghiesei, Asandului and Asandului 2020). They will help students to be more competitive in the labour market, but also to reach successful careers.

On the other hand, in order to cultivate sustainability within the institutions of the public health system, there is a need to integrate tangible activities to achieve sustainability in all departments of the institution, to reorganize the public health system in order to achieve sustainability. Thus, a series of activities could be carried out in the public health system, such as: making sustainable purchases, training employees in the direction of sustainability, promoting the culture of sustainability within medical institutions, etc.

In this context, a sustainable medical institution is that institution that harmoniously integrates concerns regarding the achievement of sustainability, in order to achieve economic-social-environmental balance in its activity, through a sustainability management capitalized within the institution.

On the other hand, a sustainable university is the university that harmoniously combines education, research through a complex process of ensuring an interdisciplinary balance in the context of the optimal use of the natural environment, ensuring social equity and economic well-being by achieving a collaboration with the stakeholders involved in this process.

Analyzing the university centers in Romania, we can mention that within the content of the curricula there are disciplines related to the achievement of sustainability objectives. Teodoreanu (2014) in his work, “Sustainable business

education – a Romanian perspective,” carried out an investigation through the prism of which he conducted a screening of the programs and course units, of the curricular situation regarding sustainable education in Romania (Teodoreanu, 2014, pp. 706-711).

The synthetic data presented by Teodoreanu (2014), in his work, are reproduced in Table 1. From the data in the table, it follows that in all university centers there are several course units on the topic of sustainability: “Environmental Management”, “Business Ethics”, “Strategic Management” and “Quality Management”.

Table 1. The curricular situation of sustainable education in university centers in Romania

Topics	University centers				
Specific courses	Bucharest	Cluj-Napoca	Iasi	Brasov	Constanta
Environmental Management	x	x	x	x	x
Environmental Economics			x		
Environmental Law		x			x
Ecology	x	x		x	
Sustainable Development		x			
Sustainability					
Business Ethics	x	x	x	x	x
CSR (Social Responsibility)					
Entrepreneurship and Innovation	x	x	x	x	
Strategic Management	x	x	x	x	x
Quality Management	x	x	x	x	x
Intercultural Management	x		x		
Community Management					

Source: Teodoreanu (2014)

At the same time, we can note that only in some university centers there are such courses as: “Environmental Economics” – this course unit is present at the university centers in Iasi; “Sustainable Development”, found in Cluj-Napoca and “Intercultural Management” in Iasi and Bucharest. At the same time, some courses such as “Sustainability”, “CSR”, “Community Management” are not present in any university center.

In this sense, it is necessary to carry out a screening of the thematic contents, of the course units focused on sustainability present in the study programs, within the university centers of *Alecu Russo* State University of Balti, the Academy of

Economic Studies of Moldova, the State University of Moldova, Technical University of Moldova, *Bogdan Petriceicu Hasdeu* State University. In Table 2, the result of the screening, of the curricular situation regarding the emergence of sustainable education in the university centers of the Republic of Moldova is presented. Analyzing the curricular situation in the most important university centers in the Republic of Moldova, we specify that in all higher education institutions there are course units such as: Quality Management, Strategic Management, Business Ethics/Professional Ethics.

At the same time, some courses such as “Environmental Management” are not found in the ASEM curricula, while in the other higher education institutions it is present.

Table 2. The curricular situation of sustainable education in the university centers of the Republic of Moldova

Topics	University centers				
Specific courses	ASEM	USARB	USM	UTM	USCH
Environmental Management		X	X	X	X
Environmental Economics					
Environmental Law		X			
Ecology		X	X		
Sustainable Development				X	
Sustainability (Sustainable Development Management)	X				
Business Ethics/ Professional Ethics	X	X	X	X	X
CSR (Social Responsibility)	X		X		
Entrepreneurship and Innovation	X		X	X	X
Strategic Management	X	X	X	X	X
Quality Management	X	X	X	X	X
Intercultural Management	X		X		
Community Management					

Source: elaborated by the author

It should be noted that, due to a broader educational offer in other universities, this course unit can be found under the “Ecology” specialty at USARB, USM, USCH. At the same time, at UTM this unit can be found in the specialties related to “Energy”.

The “Ecology” course unit is only found at USARB and USM. The course unit “Environmental Law” is only found within the USARB institution of higher education.

In addition to this, we can mention that the course unit “CSR” can be found within ASEM and USM universities in the study plans and study programs of students’ training in the field of economics.

At the same time, the course unit “Entrepreneurship and Innovation” can be found in the study plans of students from economic specialties within the mentioned universities, with course units such as “Entrepreneurship” and “Innovation Management” within ASEM, USM, UTM, USCH, USARB. It should be noted that, within the USARB, the course unit “Entrepreneurship” is not included in the study programs of students majoring in economics.

In addition, the course unit “Intercultural Management” is included in the study plans of students trained in the economic field only within ASEM and USM, in the 2nd study cycle, i.e., master’s studies.

We must point out that the course unit “Sustainable Development” is a course unit included in the training of master’s students at UTM.

It should also be mentioned that only within ASEM the course “Sustainable Development Management” is included in the education plans for students in the 2nd cycle – master’s studies, where the SDGs are addressed, but also the need to connect the business environment, higher education institutions to the Sustainable Development Goals. At the same time, such course units as “Community Management”, “Environmental Economics” are not included in the educational plans of the universities offered for analysis.

Thus, following the analysis carried out, we can reiterate that the universities must evaluate their didactic process, but also the structure of the education plans in order to include in the education plans the course units that would help to train and substantiate sustainability skills in order to achieve the Objectives of Sustainable Development. We consider it necessary to include the following course units: “Sustainability”/ “Sustainable Development Management” in the training of future specialists from economic, energy, etc. study programs. At the same time, we propose the implementation of the “CSR” course unit with a preponderance in economic study programs, which would help future specialists to be aware of the need to demonstrate ethical behavior towards all market stakeholders.

In order to achieve sustainability in higher education institutions as well as those in the public health system, it is necessary to apply the institution’s Sustainable Development Model, which includes a series of stages in order to anchor institutions on the path of sustainable development.

In our opinion, we propose higher education institutions as well as those in the public health system, to follow several stages, in order to implement the Sustainable Development Model:

1. *Appointing a sustainability committee* – in our opinion, a first step in achieving sustainability within higher education institutions and within public health institutions is the appointment of a sustainability committee consisting of

3-4 members responsible for following the principles, carrying out measures to achieve sustainability in general, but also at the level of faculties/departments, departments/sections.

2. *Elaboration of the sustainability strategy within the higher education institution/medical institution* – we believe that the next step in achieving sustainability within higher education institutions and within medical institutions is the development of the strategy for achieving sustainability, which is a document developed by the sustainability committee and presents the approach of the higher education institution in cultivating, assuming and respecting strategic objectives of achieving sustainability. We also propose that the strategy to achieve sustainability should contribute to the creation of sustainable institutions, focused on the correct and efficient exploitation of human potential, on the creation of a green campus, but also on the foundation of a culture of sustainability. In our opinion, local, regional, national, international cooperation and collaboration is the key to success in creating sustainable institutions.

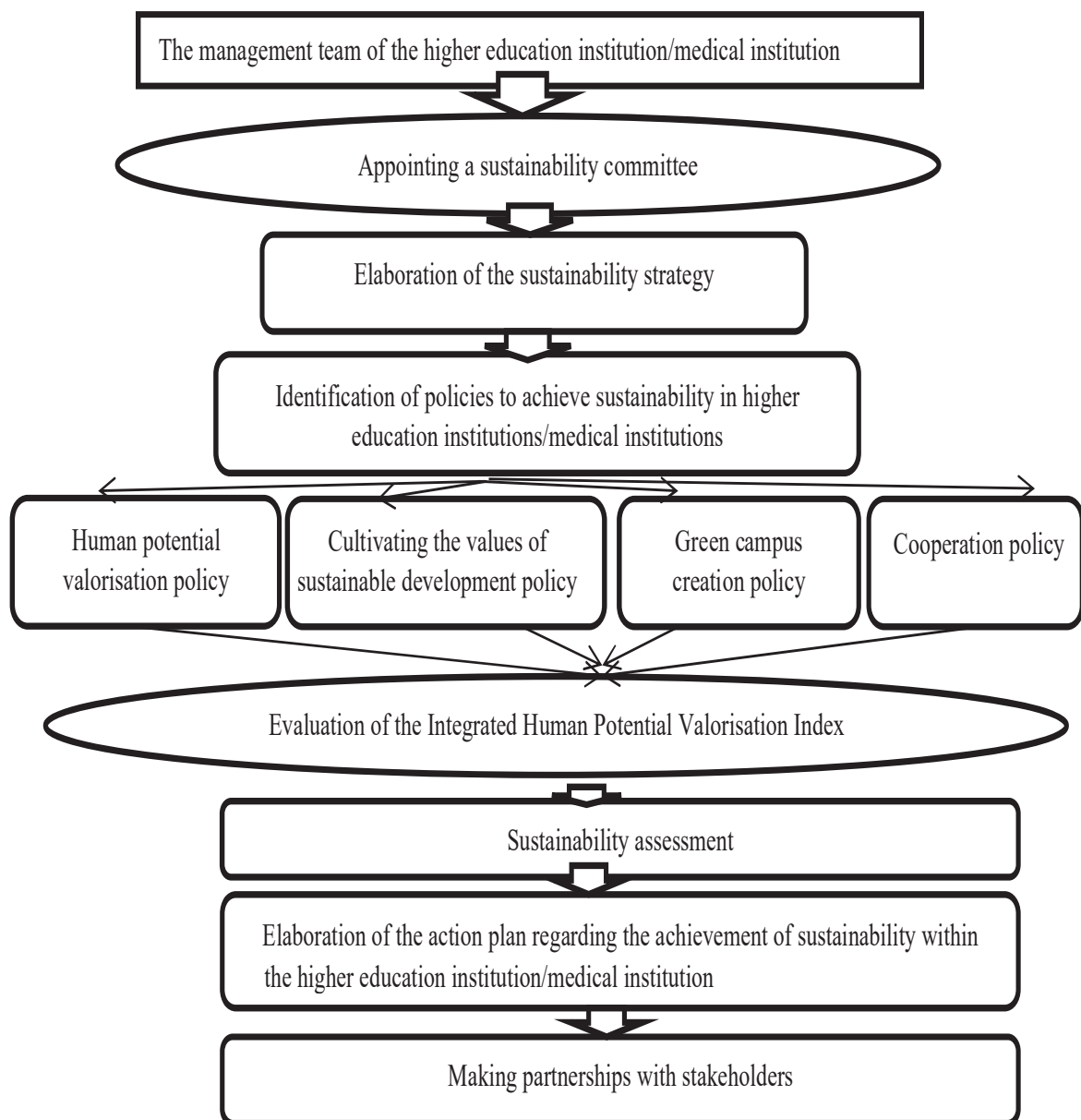
3. *Identifying policies to create sustainable institutions* – the next step in achieving sustainability is the development of policies to achieve sustainability, for each of the 3 components of university sustainability: ecological security, economic well-being, social equity. In our opinion, the policies must be focused on the basic components of achieving sustainability: the policy of valorization on human potential, the policy of cultivating the values of sustainable development, the policy of creating the green campus, the policy of reanimating cooperation in achieving sustainability.

4. *Evaluation of the Integrated Human Potential Valorization Index* – in our opinion, the next step in achieving university sustainability is the evaluation of the Integrated Human Potential Valorization Index, where the institution, applying the methodology proposed by us in the evaluation of human potential, will be able to identify the degree of valorization of human potential at the institution level, but also the problems, the challenges they face in this regard. At the same time, it will be possible to elucidate the necessary measures to increase the efficiency of capitalizing on human potential at the institution level.

5. *Assessing the sustainability of the institution* – we believe that the next step in achieving sustainability is the application of the model proposed by us in the assessment of sustainability, which, in our opinion, will guide the institution towards the assessment of the institution's sustainability, will help to identify the indicators in which the institution is positioned more deficiently and which require an urgent resuscitation. At the same time, the calculation of the Institution's Sustainability Evaluation Index will provide the opportunity to elucidate the urgent measures that must be applied both at the institution level, in general, and at the faculty/department, chair/sections level, in particular.

6. *Elaboration of the action plan* – the action plan to achieve sustainable development must include every actor and stakeholder that can help the institution

to achieve sustainability. Thus, the action plan will be focused on identifying the real actions that must be carried out by each individual employee/teacher, researcher, student, on the one hand, but also tangible activities that must be carried out at the level of department/sections, faculty/department, university/medical institution. A special place will also be given to the stakeholders of the higher education institution, such as: colleges, high schools, NGOs, the business environment, public sector institutions, mass media, international institutions, which will be able to contribute to sustainable development.



Source: elaborated by the author

Figure 1. Implementation of the Sustainable Development Model applicable in higher education institutions and those in the public health system

7. Ratification of local-national-international cooperation agreements in order to achieve sustainability – the next step, in our opinion, is the ratification of agreements both with state institutions and those in the private sector, a measure that will help to improve the efficiency of achieving sustainability, on the one hand, but also to increase the insertion of students, the adaptation of education plans, the needs of entrepreneurs. We believe that, in this way, higher education institutions as well as institutions in the public health system will strengthen their relations with their stakeholders, concluding these agreements, and, at the same time, will obtain multiple benefits, which, from a strategic perspective, will contribute to the efficiency the development of institutions.

In our opinion, focusing on the principles of achieving sustainability, assuming values, implementing tangible measures, will help higher education institutions as well as those in the medical system to step firmly on the path of sustainability, in the context of expanding partnerships, which will contribute to achieving sustainability of the whole society.

In the 21st century, a sustainable society is a socially, economically, environmentally, and educationally responsible society, contributing to the balancing of resource consumption and the efficiency of its development in the context of sustainability. We believe that universities, as “pumping engines of values in society”, will reanimate the system, infiltrate new responsibilities and principles, establish a new vision of the university of the future and build a viable society with equal opportunities for everyone, but and with multiple benefits for every citizen.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Following the study carried out by us, we presented the main conclusions and recommendations of the performed investigation, evaluating the sustainability of higher education institutions (ASEM, USARB, USM, USCH, UAIC).

We believe that a weak point that we have identified in all four evaluated higher education institutions is the lack of a sustainability strategy, which is becoming an imperative for sustainable higher education institutions. Thus, we believe that each higher education institution must develop a sustainability strategy, based on which to identify its approach to achieving sustainability through tangible, effective measures, periodically evaluated, by implementing university sustainability management, by involving to all stakeholders, along with the awareness of partners in order to achieve sustainability.

Another suggestion, as a result of the study carried out, is the inclusion in the curriculum of course units on the topic of sustainability (Sustainable Development Management /Sustainability) which would help cultivate sustainability skills among students. From the beginning, this course can be introduced to students from economics, law, pedagogy programs, with the possibility of extension to

other specialties, in the 2nd study cycle – master’s studies. Later, these courses can also be included for students from the 1st cycle – undergraduate studies.

On the other hand, it would be beneficial to introduce more learning units on the topic of sustainability, to students from economic specialties, and law. It will help sensitize students on the need to ensure sustainability in the production/service delivery process, business management. Students must understand that it would be good for the businesses managed/opened by them to have a sustainability department, which would be concerned with ensuring/connecting the economic unit to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Objectives. On the other hand, students must understand the need for cooperation in terms of achieving sustainability, making sustainable purchases, the need to save resources, use renewable energy sources, etc. To cultivate these competencies in students, it is necessary to increase the learning units related to sustainability.

Table 3. Conclusions and recommendations following the sustainability assessment study of ASEM, USARB, USM, USCH, UAIC

Conclusions	Recommendations
The universities of the Republic of Moldova register an average level of sustainability	Appointment of a Sustainability Committee (committees to achieve sustainability) that would deal with sustainability management within the higher education institution.
The universities of the Republic of Moldova focus more on the economic dimension of sustainability, to the detriment of the other dimensions	Balancing concerns of achieving sustainability across all four dimensions.
All analyzed universities do not have a sustainability strategy	Elaboration of a sustainability strategy (action plan).
All the analyzed universities do not have a section dedicated to sustainability on the institution’s website	Allocating a section to sustainability on the website of the higher education institution.
Moldovan universities show poorly directed concerns about achieving sustainability	Intensification and publication on the website of the efforts, concerns of the universities regarding the achievement of sustainability.
Moldovan universities have very few courses and course units on the topic of sustainability	The inclusion, in study plans, of course units/learning units focused on achieving sustainability.
Moldovan universities access few projects on the dimension of sustainability	Intensification of the submission of projects on the topic of sustainability.

Conclusions	Recommendations
Moldovan teachers publish a small number of articles on the topic of sustainability	Increasing the number of published articles, monographs, course materials on the topic of sustainability developed by university students from the Republic of Moldova.
Moldovan universities have a small number of collaboration agreements with the business environment on the dimension of sustainability	Ratification of agreements with the business environment regarding the promotion of student practice (in the sustainability department), regarding the organization of joint scientific events on the topic of sustainability.
Moldovan universities pay the least attention to the environmental dimension of sustainability	There is a strong need for greening the university campus, involving students in cleaning the environment, but also saving resources (installing LED bulbs with sensors, reducing water consumption by water flow reduction, etc.). The classrooms should be lit using 2-3 switches that would provide the possibility to connect electricity to certain areas (in the country, in the hall), thus saving electricity. This system is already operational within the USARB. At the same time, there is a need to collect waste separately (paper, glass, plastic) and recycle it.

Source: elaborated by the author

At the same time, another imperative is the consolidation of research on the topic of sustainability, thus, based on the study, we noticed little concerns of the university students from the Republic of Moldova on the dimension of sustainability. However, we believe that by raising public awareness of the need to achieve sustainability, we will be able to make progress.

In addition to the above recommendations, there is a need for both universities and medical institutions to implement the Sustainable Development Model that will help institutions to anchor all their activities in order to achieve institutional sustainability.

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