

<https://doi.org/10.16926/eat.2025.14.13>

Anna BATORCZAK

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7740-3586>

University of Warsaw

e-mail: a.batorczak@uw.edu.pl

Needs and opportunities for student participation in decision-making for sustainable development at universities

How to cite [jak cytować]: Batorczak, A. (2025). Needs and opportunities for student participation in decision-making for sustainable development at universities. *Edukacyjna Analiza Transakcyjna*, 14, 231–243.

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the importance of student participation in decision-making for sustainable development at universities. In the article a pedagogical model that empowers and motivates students to become active and critical citizens, able to participate in shaping a sustainable future is briefly presented. Additionally some of conceptual frameworks of students participatory practices in school presented the research literature are discussed. The last part of the article presents two international programs aimed at strengthening student activity for sustainable development at universities: eco-campus and green office.

Keywords: students, participation, university, sustainable development, education

Introduction

Education for sustainable development is commonly recognized as a key element of quality education and a crucial enabler for Sustainable Development. Recognizing that proper education is a key condition for achieving the assumptions of sustainable development, education was established as one of the sev-

enteen Sustainable Development Goals adopted at the 70th session of the UN General Assembly held on 25-27 September 2015 in New York with the participation of 100 representatives of states, heads of government and leaders of civil society. SDG 4 Quality Education in target 4.7 aims in

by 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development¹

Higher education sector is a particularly important place for undertaking education for sustainable development (ESD). It is universities that prepare future generations of professionals and political and social leaders, thanks to whom it should be possible to transform current paradigms and introduce the principles of sustainable development in all spheres of functioning of societies and individuals (Kalinowska & Batorczak, 2017, p. 283). The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the importance of student participation in decision-making for sustainable development at universities. This is a result of my observations as a lecturer in education for sustainable development and someone involved in sustainable development activities both at university and in the formal education sector. The literature on the required competencies in ESD, transformative teaching and learning objectives is very extensive. Reference can also be made to numerous studies and recommendations from UNESCO itself, the institution responsible for initiating and shaping education for sustainable development in the world. Many models have also been described that promote active student engagement within and beyond the school community. In my article, I address two of the most recognizable models of student engagement in sustainable development at universities: eco-campus programs and green office programs. These are programs I have had the opportunity to experience first-hand as member of the Council of the Eco-Schools Program in Poland and through promoting the green office concept.

The role of sustainable development at universities and students' perception of it – example from the University of Warsaw.

We are seeing increased involvement of universities in sustainable development activities in the world and in Poland. An example is the University of Warsaw (UW). In 2021, the Rector's team for ecology and the climate crisis developed a strategic document presenting the strategic actions that the University

¹ <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

wants to take in connection with climate change and the biodiversity crisis – Agenda for Climate and Sustainable Development. The adoption of the Strategy resulted in practical actions coordinated by the initiative “Smart Green University” also established in 2021. Common practices of waste segregation at the university, promotion of bicycle transport, vegetarian meals in canteens, sharing food points are just examples of practical actions taken at the University of Warsaw towards sustainable development. The University of Warsaw was the first university in Poland to join the “Race to Zero” initiative supported by the United Nations. The entities involved in the campaign declare taking immediate action to halve greenhouse gas emissions by 2030.

Activities undertaken for sustainable development at the university and individual faculties are popularized through, among others, the organization of the “Green Day”. During this event, lectures as well as workshops and events such as preparing vegetarian meals or clothes exchange are organized

Particularly noteworthy is the Green Dialogue Platform, a place promoting research, publications and events undertaken at the University of Warsaw that serve the implementation of the principles of sustainable development and related partnerships.

In 2024 a report on the social responsibility of the university was developed by the University of Warsaw. It is the first strategic document of this type at the University of Warsaw, which contains information on the activities and achievements of the university in terms of its responsibility towards members of the UW community, the social environment and the natural environment. The UW Social Responsibility Report was distinguished in a competition organized by the Responsible Business Forum.

Despite the efforts of the University of Warsaw and all achievements in taking actions for sustainable development, students do not rate the actions taken highly. In January 2024, the University of Warsaw and the Charles University in Prague started a project financed from the mini-grant fund of the Copernicus Alliance aiming to activate students from both Universities for initiating activities supporting sustainable development at their universities. Part of the project was survey aiming in students' assessment of environment and sustainable development activities undertaken by the University. At the University of Warsaw the survey was completed by 24 students of the inter-faculty master's degree studies: Sustainable Development and Inter-faculty Environmental Protection Studies – thus students aware of the issues of sustainable development. As many as 71% of these students stated that the university is not taking sufficient action to protect the environment and sustainable development. A case of students from the Charles University in Prague of the same opinion was 33% of students, while 67% students found the university's activities satisfactory.

In Your opinion, does the University take sufficient actions to protect the environment and sustainable development?



Figure 1

Results of students' survey undertaken at the University of Warsaw and the Charles University in Prague

Source: own materials.

In the survey, students commented on what, in their opinion, were barriers to the effective implementation of sustainable development principles at the university.

Systemic failures on the university side:

- lack of infrastructure (transport infrastructure, sorting bins, ...),
- buildings & facilities in need of reconstruction,
- community: lack of opportunities for out-of-school activities,
- study & expertise: lack of relevant programmes/courses, lack of methodological guidance & data for evidence-based decisions.

Shortcomings on the part of students:

- low awareness of strategic documents,
- lack of demand for data (watchdog role not required),
- low participation and empowerment,
- scepticism: "Not really. I can only participate as a spectator".

The answer to the question why not all students notice the university's activities for the environment and sustainable development may be insufficient promotion of "green university activities" and poor communication. This is not easy in such a large and complex institution as the University of Warsaw. However, it is noteworthy that students themselves emphasize that they are not sufficiently and appropriately involved in the decision-making process.

Participation as an important indication of effective ESD implantation.

Education is commonly recognized as an instrument to achieving sustainable development however to ensure effectiveness the concept of teaching and learning must be transformed to enable individuals to lead sustainable development as agents of change (Leicht et al., 2018, p. 32). Educational initiatives that are characterized by multi-stakeholder engagement, dialogue and active participation at school level are supported by the United Nations, which is the initiator of sustainable development actions from Agenda 21 to the 2030 Agenda and the 17 Sustainable Development Goals.

Education is more than just a cognitive experience and learning goes beyond the traditional classroom setting towards engaging students with real-world problems and solutions (Leicht et al., 2018; UNESCO, 2017). A pedagogical model that empowers and motivates students to become active and critical citizens, able to participate in shaping a sustainable future, is described by Rieckmann. According to the researcher the pedagogy of education for sustainable development should be learner centred, action oriented and transformative (Rieckmann, 2018, p. 48).

- (1) Learner- centred approach. In this approach, instead of passively transmitting knowledge, the teacher strengthens students' independent, active development of knowledge. The teacher recognizes students' autonomy and their prior knowledge and experiences are the starting point for stimulating learning processes in which students build their own knowledge base.
- (2) Action-oriented learning approach is based on the experiential four-stage learning cycle developed by Kolb in 1984. Kolb's Learning Cycle includes (i) gaining concrete experience, (ii) observation and reflection, (iii) creating abstract concepts for generalization, and (iv) application to new situations. In action-oriented learning, students engage in action and the experiences they gain provide a basis for reflection in relation to the intended learning process and personal development.
- (3) The transformative learning approach aims to enable students to question and then change the ways they see and think about the world to develop their understanding. The role of the educator is to empower students and challenge them to change their worldview.

The above-mentioned theoretical pedagogical approaches, in order to be implemented in practice, require the use of participatory teaching and learning methods that will direct students to take actions for sustainable development (Rieckmann, 2018, p. 50).

A common feature of action-oriented transformative pedagogy is that, apart from highlighting the student's role in the teaching -learning process, it also refers to the surrounding reality. Students not only learn through their own experience, but also influence it through conscious choices and decisions.

About students' participation – some theoretical notes.

The starting point of children's right to participation is considered to be Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) which states that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters concerning them and that their views must be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the children. It is emphasized that children's right to participate is more than just the right to express opinions or participate in decision-making, but also has a profound meaning related to the status of children in society. This is an exceptional human rights provision as it concerns the legal status of children, who do not have the full autonomy of adults but are subjects of rights. This means that the child, who is still dependent on care, protection, upbringing and education, also gains an independent social status through participation rights (Kosher & Gross-Manos, 2024, p. 2).

Since then children's participation has been explored and framed in various theoretical models (Sevon et al., 2023, p. 2). The most well known theoretical framework is Roger Hart's "Ladder of Children's participation" (1992). This model of children's participation in society is presented as a metaphorical "ladder," with eight ascending rungs representing increasing levels of children's inclusion in decision making process. The three lowest rungs (manipulation, decoration and tokenism) are all recognized as "non-participation" while the top five rungs are different forms of effective participation with top one: youth initiated shared decisions with adults. Roger Hart's ladder of children's participation is adapted from Sherry Arnstein's conceptual framework: "ladder of citizen participation" (1969) which related to adult participation in planning processes. Ten years later after developing the model of children participation Hart clarified that the term "children" covers all legal minors from preschool-age children to adolescents (Hart, 2008, p.22). The children participation must be implemented in the private sphere, as in the family context as well as in the public and formal settings, as in school.

The scope of children's participation in everyday life in the family, school and community was examined by Kosher and Gross-Manos (2024) on a sample of 46 000 children from 32 countries based on the third wave of the Children's Worlds – a worldwide survey of children's subjective well-being. According to their findings neither school nor community context are perceived by children

as places where they can realize their right to participate to the same extent as in the family context. As the authors note, especially in relation to school, this is a cause for concern. School is the central arena of everyday life for children, where they acquire knowledge and develop skills. Thus, the (perceived) lack of opportunities for children to participate in decision making process at school can be considered a social problem (Kosher & Gross-Manos, 2024, p. 17).

The document “Bucharest EU Children’s Declaration” developed during the Romanian Presidency of the EU Council in 2019 emphasized that school should become a place where children can learn about participation and exercise participation outside their families. It was pointed out that the full recognition of children’s rights to participate in decision-making can have beneficial implications for the implementation of sustainable development principles:

The way children think, their openness to change, their unbiased views, and their out-of-the-box thinking, are critical traits that can help find solutions to the world’s most persistent issues, be it poverty, climate change or migration.²

A review of selected programmes supporting student participation in decision-making for sustainable development at universities.

In the research literature conceptual frameworks of students participatory practices in school are well recognised. In literature based review researchers Perry-Hazan and Somech list, among others, conceptual frameworks of student participatory practices at school by Mannion et al. (2020) and Thomson and Holdsworth (2003). In the first framework four ‘grounds’ of student participation are identified: (1) participation that takes place in and through teaching and assessment processes in traditional classrooms and spaces such as laboratories and sports halls; (2) participation as opportunities to participate in and shape school life outside formal lessons, e.g. in clubs, societies, trips, fundraising, competitions and awards; (3) participation in formal or structured groups such as student councils, but also groups dedicated to specific school policy issues; and (4) connections with the wider community. Thomson and Holdsworth identified three key factors: (1) student participation in curricular projects; (2) student leadership activities such as student councils; (3) accountability measures, such as surveys of students to amplify the review of school performance (Perry-Hazan & Somech, 2021, p. 7).

² <https://www.unicef.org/romania/stories/story-bucharest-eu-childrens-declaration-drawings>
z dn.27.12.2024

Though, in relation to student participation in decision-making at universities, there is lack of research and scientific studies. Observations of practices at universities also do not indicate that in practice such activities, except the statutory activities of student councils, are common. This does not mean, however, that such practices do not exist. On the contrary, especially when it comes to strengthening students' activities for sustainable development at universities, there are at least two well recognized programs: eco-campus and green office.

(1) Eco-campus

Eco-campus is one of the programs developed by Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE). It should be emphasized that FEE is one of the world's largest environmental education organizations founded in 1981.

Eco-campus is the equivalent of the largest global sustainable schools programme Eco-schools developed by FEE in response to the recommendations contained in Agenda 21 to conduct education for sustainable development. While the Eco Schools program is aimed at school students and the school community, the Eco-campus program operates at universities. Both are award programs and based on the seven – step methodology:

- Form an Eco Committee
- Environmental Survey
- Monitoring & Evaluation
- Curriculum Integration
- Networking and Collaboration
- Eco Code

On the program's website, its goal is presented as follows:

...to guide higher education institutions on their sustainable journey and model sustainability as an integral part of campus life while involving staff, teachers and the student body by empowering them to become forward thinkers and lead the way towards sustainable development³.

The growing interest in this program is evidenced by the organization of the 1st International Conference of FEE EcoCampus in 2024. The conference was held at Lisbon School of Education of the Polytechnic University of Lisbon. The event was attended by the 110 participants including students, academics, facilities staff, and administrators from 15 countries. Recently the Eco-campus programme has 214 institutions in 19 countries.

(2) Green Office Model

Green Office model is a network of university student initiatives aimed at motivating the university community to act for sustainable development. The aim of the Green Office initiative is to inform, connect and support the university community in actions towards sustainable development. Green Offices also ini-

³ <https://www.ecoschools.global/ecocampus-about>

tiate their own projects aimed at implementing the issues and principles of sustainable development in the university's educational, research and economic activities. Students and employees of the university jointly make decisions and implement projects for the sustainable development of the university community.

The Green Office model was the subject of a diploma thesis conducted under the supervision of dr. Batorczak in 2029 at the University Center for Environmental Studies and Sustainable Development Research at the University of Warsaw. The results of the work were included in a joint publication. According to the findings the Green Office model operates on six key principles:

1. Students and staff: A dynamic team of student interns, volunteers and university staff form the core of the Green Office. They are directly responsible for running the unit and its projects.
2. Mandate: The Green Office receives an official mandate from the university to implement sustainability projects and policies, or to manage specific goals of an existing sustainability strategy.
3. Resources: The university provides a budget to pay for salaries, project expenses and office space. The team may also use other internal resources, such as design or catering services, event venues.
4. Integration: The Green Office is integrated into the organizational structure of the university, is overseeing a steering committee and participates in meetings of relevant committees.
5. Collaboration: All team activities are conducted in close cooperation and partnership with internal and external stakeholders, including student groups and student community representatives, academics, management and administration of the university.
6. Training: The student team and volunteers receive workshops and training to ensure the quality and effectiveness of their work.

The first Green Office was set up in Maastricht in 2010. The Green Office Model currently exists at 60 universities across Europe and one African country. In 2015, Model Green Office received the Japan-UNESCO Award for Education for Sustainable Development.

The above comparison addresses only the operational aspects of both models, not their impact. Both the Eco-Campus and Green Office programs are characterized by their inclusive and action-oriented approach, where universities and students engage, demonstrate commitment, and implement concrete actions for sustainable development. In both cases, their actions are supported and respected by the university authorities.

The success of the Eco-campus model (219 institutions in 19 countries) can be attributed to its long tradition and recognition, which originates from the world-renowned Eco-schools programme. A transparent operational methodology and provision from national operators strongly support the Eco-campus

model. The Green Flag award also contributes to the model's recognition and, therefore, attractiveness.

The Green Office model is less structured and lacks evaluation and monitoring. However, its major advantage is that the university is responsible for financing the Green Office and provides permanent office space. This provides a solid foundation for operational continuity and may also be more attractive to students willing to get involved.

Table 1
Operational comparison of the Eco Campus and Green Office models

Operational comparison of the Eco Campus and Green Office models											
model	Clear operational framework	Support from the national operator	Employed students	Volunteers	University employees	Financing	Office space	Mandate – recognition by the university authorities	Regular monitoring and evaluation	Award	Numbers
Eco-Campus	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	219 institutions in 19 countries
Green Office movement			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			60 offices in 7 countries

Source: own research.

Summary

This article attempts to draw attention to the importance of involving students in the decision-making process regarding actions for sustainable development at universities. Research shows that involving students in decision-making processes, when done effectively, can benefit everyone involved. It is an important aspect of promoting children’s rights, ensuring their well-being and creating a more inclusive and democratic society. Moreover, UNESCO recommendations clearly emphasize that education is a key instrument in achieving sustainable development, but for this education to be effective, the concept of teaching and learning must be transformed to enable individuals to lead sustainable development as agents of change (Leicht A. et al., 2018, p. 32). There are many examples of engaging students in sustainable development activities at schools. In each of these approaches takes into account actively initiating and

implementing changes for sustainable development, while taking into account aspects of learning, school-community relations, school practices, ethos, vision, and leadership. For the long-term impact of such actions, a clearly presented methodology and support from both external structures responsible for the functioning of a given model and internal structures—the institutions where these activities are undertaken—are crucial. However, it seems that the key factor in the success of this type of initiatives is that these activities are initiated by young people from the very beginning. They decide whether they want to get involved and what types of activities interest them.

This type of approach is much rarer in university practice. It can be stated that the practices of engaging students in undertaking activities at universities, including activities aimed at achieving sustainable development, are not widespread. They are also not perceived and studied as an element of transformative pedagogy.

The conceptual framework for student participation in decision-making and sustainable development activities at universities is widely discussed in the academic literature. However, there is a lack of research and studies examining how student involvement in decision-making and activities at universities impacts both the learning process and the functioning of the university itself. The main conclusion of this publication is to indicate the need to popularize student activation and involve them in decision-making in practice, but also to undertake research on the effectiveness of action-oriented pedagogy in higher education.

References

- Batorczak, A. (2023). Edukacja na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju do 2023 roku. *Zapiski Kujawsko-Dobrzyńskie*, 36, 229–240.
- Bucharest EU Children's Declaration | UNICEF Romania. (n.d.). Retrieved January 2, 2025, from <https://www.unicef.org/romania/bucharest-eu-childrens-declaration>
- Hart, R. A. (1992). *Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship* (Innocenti Essays No. 4). UNICEF International Child Development Centre. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ucf/inness/inness92-6.html>
- Hart, R. A. (2008). Stepping back from “the ladder”: Reflections on a model of participatory work with children. In A. Reid, B. B. Jensen, J. Nikel, & V. Simovska (Eds.), *Participation and learning: Perspectives on education and the environment, health and sustainability* (pp. 19–31). Springer Netherlands. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6416-6_2
- Issues and trends in education for sustainable development—UNESCO Digital Library. (n.d.). Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261445.pdf>

- Kalinowska, A., & Batorczak, A. (2017). Uczelnie wyższe wobec wyzwań celów zrównoważonego rozwoju. *Zeszyty Naukowe. Organizacja i Zarządzanie / Politechnika Śląska*, 104, 281–290.
- Kosher, H., & Gross-Manos, D. (2024). Children's participation in everyday life: An international overview. *Children & Society*, 38(6), 1899–1919. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12852>
- Leicht, A., Heiss, J., & Byun, W. J. (Eds.). (2018). *Issues and trends in education for sustainable development* (Vol. 5). UNESCO Publishing. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000261445.pdf>
- Perry-Hazan, L. (2021). Conceptualising conflicts between student participation and other rights and interests. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 42(2), 184–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2019.1599324>
- Rusak, K., & Batorczak, A. (2022). "Green Office" jako forma oddolnej studenckiej inicjatywy wprowadzania zasad zrównoważonego rozwoju na uniwersytetach. *Polish Journal for Sustainable Development*, 25(1), 75–82. <https://doi.org/10.15584/pjsd.2021.25.1.8>
- Sevón, E., Mustola, M., Siippainen, A., & Vlasov, J. (2023). Conceptualising conflicts between student participation and other rights and interests. *Educational Review*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2215465>
- UNESCO. (2017). *Education for sustainable development goals: Learning objectives*. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/education-sustainable-development-goals-learning-objectives>

Websites

- EcoCampus – About. (n.d.). *EcoSchools Global*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://www.ecoschools.global/ecocampus-about>
- Our mission and history. (n.d.). *Foundation for Environmental Education (FEE)*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://www.fee.global/our-mission-and-history>
- Vision. (n.d.). *Green Office Movement*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://www.greenofficemovement.org/vision/>
- Agenda na rzecz klimatu i zrównoważonego rozwoju. (n.d.). *Uniwersytet Warszawski*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://www.uw.edu.pl/agenda-na-rzecz-klimatu-i-zrownowazonego-rozwoju/>
- Zielona strona UW. (n.d.). *Uniwersytet Warszawski*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://www.uw.edu.pl/zielona-strona-uw/>
- O PZD. (n.d.). *Porozumienie Zielonych Działów UW*. Retrieved January 5, 2025, from <https://pzd.uw.edu.pl/pzd/o-pzd/>

Potrzeby i szanse partycypacji studentów w procesie decyzyjnym na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju na uniwersytetach

Streszczenie

Celem tego artykułu jest zwrócenie uwagi na znaczenie udziału studentów w podejmowaniu decyzji na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju na uniwersytetach. W artykule zwięźle przedstawiono model pedagogiczny, który wzmacnia i motywuje studentów do stawania się aktywnymi i krytycznymi obywatelami, zdolnymi do udziału w kształtowaniu zrównoważonej przyszłości. Ponadto omówiono niektóre z koncepcji praktyk partycypacyjnych w szkole przedstawianych w literaturze badawczej. W ostatniej części artykułu zaprezentowano dwa międzynarodowe programy mające na celu wzmocnienie aktywności studentów na rzecz zrównoważonego rozwoju na uniwersytetach: eko-kampus i zielone biuro.

Słowa kluczowe: studenci, udział, uniwersytety, zrównoważony rozwój, edukacja.