

Engaging the School Community into Diversity and Inclusion: The Case of EHESP School of Public Health

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Abstract

EHESP School of Public Health is a higher education institution specialised in public health and social welfare. For several years and through a large participatory process, the School intends to achieve collectively the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and progressively integrate the diversity perspective in its core missions.

Keywords

sustainability and social responsibility – trans-disciplinary view of the world – systemic, prospective and collective vision

1 Introduction

Since 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the blueprint for governments, institutions and communities to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all. They address our main global challenges, including poverty, inequalities, climate change, environmental degradation, the need for prosperity, peace and justice. The world has agreed that the 17 goals are interconnected and, to ensure that nobody is left behind, each of their targets must be achieved by 2030.

Positioning education at the heart of the strategy to promote sustainable development, the 17 SDGs particularly affect Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in their core missions and organisation (Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017). Within each HEI, all services, functions and divisions need to foster cross-sector collaboration in order to reach these objectives. The key challenge is to succeed in enabling the internal collaboration among the stakeholders and the

community members (Wignor-Alvarez et al., 2020). All activities and positions within an HEI can, and must, contribute to SDGs through an enhanced transversal collaboration. Unfortunately, in spite of a wide range of initiatives, social responsibility and sustainability development is far from being fully integrated into the core activities of HEIs everywhere (Pe Symaco & Tee, 2019). However, the EHESP School of Public Health, like many French HEIs, is committed to an integrated approach of Sustainable Development and Social Responsibility (SD & SR) into its strategy, internal organisation and partnerships.

2 Social Responsibility of Higher Education Institutions

Social responsibility falls within the philosophical tradition established by Levinas and pursued by Jonas who considers responsibility as a constitutive part of humanity (Jonas, 1991). To be “responsible” (from the Latin *responsus*: answer, answer from, answer to) is, above all, a moral imperative – the human-being, as human, is obliged to respond to others, although they are not legally required to care and express solicitude for others. In academia, social and environmental responsibility makes it possible to put back the human at the heart of a long-term reflexion (Rolland & Majou de la Debutrie, 2018). By their exemplarity regarding social and environmental responsibility, universities can play a driving role towards both students and staff, as well as companies, communities and suppliers (all stakeholders). They act as role models for future generations and strongly influence not only future professional conduct and practices in the corporate world, but also their graduates’ expectations towards their future employers (Galvao et al., 2019; Ipsos & Jobteaser, 2019).

Thus, in the area of research and teaching, social and environmental responsibility brings forth a reassessment of the organisation. This responsibility has a positive impact on issues such as welcoming students or improving the well-being of all users by ensuring the success of all, fighting against inequalities, fostering a favorable atmosphere and a healthy environment for developing skills, a service quality and student satisfaction (Santos et al., 2020). A basic understanding of the social responsibility of HEIs has four main orientations (Annoot, 2012):

- Widening student education for citizenship ethics
- Participating in raising young people’s level of qualification and tackling social and educational inequalities
- Widely disseminating the results of the research conducted on education
- Providing academic and research expertise to meet the needs of economy, social life and culture

In France, since 2009, Article 55 of the Grenelle-1 Law of 2009, implementing the Grenelle agreements on environment, encourages HEIs to implement a SD & SR approach through a “Green Plan”. To this end, the Green Plan has led in 2010 to the SD & SR frame of reference (FoR), a steering tool designed by the Conférence des Présidents d’Universités (CPU), the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles (CGE) and the Réseau Français des Etudiants pour le Développement Durable (REFEDD). The FoR is built on five pillars:

- Strategy and governance
- Education
- Research
- Environmental management,
- Social policy and territorial anchoring

The Green Plan and the FoR engage HEIs into a permanent improvement process, consistent with the ISO 26000 standards, guidance on social responsibility (International Organization for Standardization, 2010). They also serve as a self-assessment tool for sustainable development actions (strengths, weaknesses, completed actions), useful for communication, exchange of good practices and, above all, as a basis for the certification process.

In the French context, this is particularly relevant as Article 55 of the Grenelle-1 Law allows universities to take an important step towards a national SD & SR certification (Journal Officiel, 2009). At the national scale, the SD & SR certification is a priority project of the roadmap of the 2013 National Environmental Conference (La conférence environnementale, 2013, p. 23) in order to “accelerate the transition towards sustainable campuses” and to “set up corresponding certifications”. At the international level, the SD & SR label enables French HEIs to place themselves among the most advanced countries, after the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (RIO+20 in 2012).

Since 2015, 31 French HEIs (approximately 10% of the total French HEI) have engaged towards the SD & SR label, often part of their strategic plan. Even though the label is a growing part of their identity and their branding, there is no sanction or strong incentive for them to implement the SD & SR engagements. There is no mechanism such as, for instance, a ranking showing how sustainable a university is, such as an annually compiled independent student campaigning network, People & Planet which measures the environmental and ethical performance of all the UK Higher Education Institutions (People & Planet University League, 2019). By publicly steering universities towards their social and environmental contributions, initiatives like this one are powerful engines to transform the education sector towards a more egalitarian and sustainable world.

3 The EHESP's Commitment

3.1 *An Engaged Higher Education Institution*

Within a contrasted French higher education landscape, EHESP School of Public Health has a singular position. As a research-based professional school in the fields of public health and social welfare, EHESP is the cradle of the professional culture for all the managers and executive civil servants of the health and welfare systems. If, by WHO standards, Public Health is defined as the art and science of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organised efforts of society (Acheson, 1988), EHESP has, in its DNA, a strong sensitivity for all aspects of social responsibility. Conscious of its role as a leader in public health education and research, the School has the ambition to impulse a promotion process, initiate the first behavioural changes and, thus, lay the essential foundations for collectively meeting the SDGs of the United Nations. Its professional education offerings include 60% of programmes related to the SDG 1: poverty reduction, SDG3: ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, SDG 10: inequality reduction, SDG 16: justice and peace, and SDG 17: partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society. Every public health registrar is now expected to show evidence of leadership in sustainable development during the training (Quantz et al., 2017).

EHESP School of Public Health obtained, in January 2020, the French sustainability SD & SR certification, awarded by the national labelling committee (managed by CIRSES, the Collective for Sustainable Development in Higher Education) for a 4-year period. This label approves the plan implemented by the school and the quality of its actions in the field of SD & SR. The label followed an audit conducted in October 2019, which evaluated EHESP's SD & SR strategy, and actions carried out in accordance with the commitments and values of the Conférence des Présidents d'Universités (CPU), the Conférence des Grandes Ecoles (CGE) and the above-mentioned frame of reference. The label confirms the sincerity of an approach integrated into a permanent improvement process, enhanced by the sharing of best practices within the group of labelled HEIs. The audit praised the commitment and concerted approach of the whole EHESP community, including staff and learners.

3.2 *Engaging Every Component in a Sustainability and Social Responsibility Strategic Plan*

The whole plan was based on the assumption that an institutional engagement with SD, enhanced by awareness and communication, supported by specific resources and people for SD implementation and a formal planning framework,

with a specific set of actions, targets, outcomes, responsibilities, timelines and management approach elements, would lead to better achievement of the goals (Filho et al., 2019). Engaging in a multi-step process of sustainability certification (SD & SR label) allowed the leadership of EHESP to structure its practices and involve progressively its entire community and stakeholders in a long-term deep transformation. The goal was clearly to engage every component of the School in the implementation of a collectively designed 5-year sustainability and social responsibility strategic plan. The certification became a management tool for introducing a dynamic of change. The first step was the identification of a Sustainability and SR Officer and a Steering Committee, composed of 17 individuals, each of them representing a constituency of the school.

In the first phase, the steering committee defined the EHESP's SD & SR strategy. By meeting once every two months (6 meetings a year), the committee identified 13 objectives for a strategic plan, along with 5 axes, a methodology for the implementation, and a monitoring process (indicators, communication tools, calendar, etc.). The "SDGs frame of reference" clearly became the international roadmap for sustainable development. As part of this approach, from the very beginning of the process, EHESP aligned, in its SD & SR policy, its own objectives, the SD & SR frame of reference (a sectoral tool for steering and self-assessment of SD & SR approach of French HEI) and the broad international frame of reference for SDGs.

The second phase, the monitoring of the objectives, began with the implementation of the 2019–2023 EHESP strategic plan. Thus, the timing allowed the integration of the SD & SR objectives into the institutional strategic orientations, in connection with the internal and external environments (governance, environment and territorial anchoring).

This second phase also aims at prioritising and designing an action plan with working groups, composed of key resource persons, staff and learners on volunteer basis.

The school is currently working on the implementation of a 'diversity' action plan, in order to promote openness to all forms of diversity and, thus, contribute to the reduction of social and cultural inequalities. A working group on diversity, composed, among others, of all officers in charge of diversity issues (secularism and the fight against radicalisation, equal opportunities, gender equality, disability, etc.) under the leadership of the Dean of Academic affairs, carries out the plan. To coordinate this policy, EHESP created a set of new roles, under the umbrella of diversity officers. But beyond these devoted officers, the massive engagement of the different stakeholders, staffs (from different academic departments, including student life, international relations, human

resources, etc.) and learners, shows that all the professions within a HEI can and must contribute, through enhanced cross-functional collaboration, in the fight against discrimination.

Finally, cooperation with the communication staff in this area is essential both internally and externally. Today, the Communication Division plays the role of disseminator of reliable, fair and transparent information. In addition, through the internal communication channels (website, social networks, paper media, events, etc.) the School can highlight the scope of its initiatives and commitments (Roussel et al., 2018). Thus, communication is crucial for all SDGs – promoting anti-smoking actions, setting up the first French smoke-free campus in 2018, informing the public about the Human Resources policy in favor of the inclusion of people with disabilities, or the institution's commitments to fight gender discrimination.

4 Diversity, the Social Pillar of an Organisation's Social Responsibility

4.1 *Promoting All Forms of Diversity*

Diversity is an obvious fact in the living world, because nature could not develop or prosper without bio-diversity. In the same way, humanity is diverse. Diversity is a booster for creativity and innovation (Levine & Stark, 2015). Working in heterogeneous groups, where people do not share the same exact beliefs and views, makes people think and argue in a more accurate way, if they want to defend their ideas and convince others.

At the same time, diversity entails many challenges, among them the fight against the exclusion of those who are not alike, without stigmatising them. Inclusive education historically developed as part of special education and was, therefore, initially associated with vulnerable populations, poverty and minorities. Most recently, the conceptual foundation of diversity and inclusion has changed, also thanks to the influence of the SDGs, and moved it from special groups towards a more proactive dimension at the larger scale of national reforms and system-level policy approaches (Schuelka et al., 2019). Consequently, based on the hypothesis that differences are an individual and a collective opportunity, many HEIs have moved towards inclusive management.

In France, the fight against discrimination is required in all companies, in accordance with the Act of November 16, 2001 (Journal Officiel, 2001). In addition to article L 122-45 of the Labour Code, which bans some forms of discrimination in the workplace (sex, origin, religion, disability, pregnancy, political and trade union opinions, etc.), the Act of November 16, 2001 bans discrimination based on sexual orientation, age, surname or physical appearance. Thus,

the French law stipulates that no one shall be excluded from a hiring procedure or from access to an internship or training opportunity, no employee can be sanctioned, dismissed or be victim of a direct or indirect discriminatory measure, in particular with regard to salary, etc. because of the abovementioned criteria. Diversity management is, above all, a political and a strategic choice, and often leads to structural changes.

Different policies have, therefore, been implemented by EHESP, in order to promote equal opportunities for staff and students, from the very early stage of admission through their training and first job. This is a way for the school to support the following SDGs: quality education (SDG4), gender equality (SDG5) and reduced inequalities (SDG10), no poverty (SDG1), decent work and economic growth (SDG8) and sustainable cities and communities (SDG11). EHESP promotes all forms of diversity in its human resources management, students' education and community and stakeholder relations. In order to state its engagement for professional equality and diversity within education while preventing and fighting discrimination, EHESP has formalised a new, ambitious Diversity Plan 2019–2023 whose objectives are:

- To support disabled people in their requests by adjusting teaching and exams, and handling individual situations (accommodation, catering, etc.) in compliance with an accessibility for all policy.
- To reduce inequality and ensure equal opportunity, including suppressing discriminatory practices and promoting the social, economic and political integration of students.
- To develop creative and innovative learning environments, such as interactive classrooms, distance and hybrid learning, accessible, community and participatory environments, while also ensuring access to all to the necessary hardware and digital literacy.
- To internationalise its human resources by encouraging intercultural diversity and by placing a high value on international experiences.
- To achieve gender equality and prevent all forms of gender-based discrimination, and propose awareness-training programmes for staff members to prevent and fight sexual harassment.
- To implement the principle of secularism, uphold the diversity of opinions, to guarantee in higher education and research a free scientific, creative and critical development.

The cross-functional diversity plan involves all the staff, including student affairs, campus management and operations, faculty, centre for teaching and learning, IT systems, campus facilities, international affairs and human resources. One of the best examples of new cross-bridging actions on campus is the participation

in the European initiative “Duo-Day”. Aimed at a better understanding of the respective professional behaviours between disabled and abled individuals, the annual Duo-Day programme allows organisations to host a number of disabled people, matching each of them with a staff member. The two members of the duo will learn how to overcome preconceptions and stereotypes. In 2019, three EHSP staff volunteered to host a disabled person, and in 2020 this number rose to eight.

What makes EHESP’s experience unique is the strict connection between students and practitioners in the Public Health space. The school trains all the health services civil servants and has, therefore, the capacity to introduce a non-discriminatory culture at a very early stage of their professional behaviours and practice. Moreover, in collaboration with the faculty, the practitioners contribute, through their teaching, to develop the learner’s capacities to analyse social conditions at risk of discrimination in the field of health.

As an example, Tessier (2017) notes that the question of the diversity of the public housed in the French health care structures is not yet part of the training of health professionals, beyond the basic regulatory recommendations (cultures, religions and secularism considerations). However, discrimination in the healthcare field is strongly interconnected, with several contemporary socio-political issues and difficulties for vulnerable populations (disabled people, the LGBTI community, illegal immigrants, etc.) to access care. Discrimination encourages health inequalities and questions voluntary or unconscious dynamics of a “selective medicine”.

4.2 *Interdisciplinary Teaching and Training Future Health Professionals*

The purpose of teaching and, thus, training professionals is to enable them, as part of their public health service, to be able to manage, among other things, an otherness situation (Tessier, 2017) and stimulate reflection and reflexivity for a deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices (Bruna et al., 2017). The EHESP’s teaching philosophy is to develop the citizen consciousness of the learners – future health professionals – including their critical mind and their reflexive capacities, to increase their ethics awareness. At the beginning of the 2019 school year, a half-day training session on diversity (disability, secularism, gender equality, etc.) was introduced for all the incoming civil servant students. The aim was to stimulate their ethical requirements, and capacity for indignation, and to identify strategies and practices that contravene the principles of equality and non-discrimination, and if necessary, to take action in the face of injustice.

Embedding sustainable development only in environmental courses, or creating specific classes not connected to the core curriculum, will not be sufficient to prepare individuals to make the necessary decisions in their daily lives

to address sustainability challenges. Interdisciplinarity increases the ability to understand complex problems and act on them, aligned to the expected outcomes from education for sustainable development (Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017).

To this end, in 2020, the school designed a new and mandatory 'climate change, transitions and health' skills set, as climate change and environmental degradation have been recognised as the most crucial public health challenge of our time (Watts et al., 2015). This workshop takes around 30 hours to complete and trains every student, regardless of their programme, in the SD & SR strategy. The course is based on transversal skills frames of reference, suitable for use in all trainings, and is designed to train learners in a systemic, forward-looking and collective vision of tomorrow's world by integrating responsibility while maintaining an ethical vision, and by allowing and encouraging the necessary changes. Thus, the course aims for students to be able to: (1) analyse a health situation through the lens of SD & SR issues, (2) implement strategies to take into account SD & SR issues, and (3) develop advocacy skills in order to mobilise their networks on SD & SR issues.

Through specific inter-professional modules, future health practitioners learn how to interact with other administrations and integrate different perspectives and constraints, in order to work more efficiently together towards the wellbeing of the population. Moreover, EHESP delivers an annual inter-professional module based on active learning. Professionals with different backgrounds and environments are given the opportunity to share, during a time of collective reflection, their knowledge and their multi-professional approaches on interdisciplinary issues related to public health. Indeed, professionals working in the field of public health are numerous and come from various backgrounds and cultures; they play a role in the organisation and implementation of public health policies, in terms of promotion, prevention, care, etc. The rationales vary from one profession to another, from one steering authority to another, from one field to another. Across these differences, the aim is to prepare the future leaders for this difficult exercise of collaboration, which is important for population health improvement and concerted working habits.

Learners are part of the society – while still learning, student life is also a time to develop students' awareness and civic engagement. Therefore, the challenge is to make them aware that they can themselves take action for sustainable development by getting involved in society. They can help to strengthen social cohesion, fight against discrimination and inequalities, and promote responsible behaviours and consumption (Roussel et al., 2018). For this reason, the school is committed to supporting and recognising student initiatives. Thanks to the School's sustainability certification and SD & SR label, students feel encouraged to propose SD related projects. Therefore, new students'

initiatives have blossomed, such as: “la fabrique à DD” (“do it yourself” workshops), a shared vegetable garden with the residents of a nursing home (the elderly buddy, in French “pote âgé”/“potager”), a musical, a two-man race, or a scientific symposium on including people with disabilities in sport.

5 Conclusion

An intelligent vision and implementation of diversity includes mapping out a path for social innovation, responsible management and the institution’s overall performance. EHESP is gradually integrating the diversity perspective in its two core missions: teaching and research. With the adoption of its diversity plan through a participatory process, EHESP takes the lead by committing itself to respond to the SDGs and by progressively getting its community fully involved in social responsibility, including students, faculty, staff, academic partners, public administration and health organisations.

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