



Perspective

# Happy Sustainability: A Future Quest for More Sustainable Universities

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**Abstract:** For decades, sustainability researchers have tenaciously insisted on transforming higher education institutions into more sustainable and inclusive campuses. Yet, as the 2030 agenda seems unlikely to be achieved, universities are struggling to meet the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4) before the 2030 deadline. In addition, the post-COVID-19 era demands quality and inclusive education that entails care for students experiencing high stress levels. So far, most of the significant achievements are within the environmental or economic dimensions of sustainable development, but strengthening the social dimension is still one pending task. The importance of happiness to sustainability initiatives on campus, and beyond, deserves further research. To this end, this article offers insights into incorporating the sustainability–happiness nexus into sustainable universities to enhance the social dimension of sustainability. COVID-19 reminds sustainability academics and stakeholders that teaching technical and scientific knowledge is necessary to become more sustainable. Still, it is not sufficient to achieve the goals in the 2030 agenda. Providing inclusive and sustainable quality education will be reached when more sustainable universities consider happiness the ultimate goal of human development.

**Keywords:** higher education institutions; sustainability; happiness; SDG 4; social sustainability



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## 1. Introduction

A more sustainable university is an academic topic primarily concerned with higher education institutions engaging in sustainability through a broad and diverse array of strategies focused on preventing, reducing, or eliminating their environmental burden to fulfill its substantive functions of teaching, research, outreach, partnership, and stewardship (Findler et al. 2019). Since its inception, sustainability in campus has been seen as an icon of environmental and economic concerns, but inadequate attention has been paid to the social dimension of sustainable development (Wright 2010; Lozano 2011; Sassen and Azizi 2018). This situation is not a peculiarity of higher education institutions as it also occurs in other settings (Dragun and Jakobsson 1997; Eizenberg and Jabareen 2017).

Education is a critical issue for promoting human development, which is reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4). Accordingly, higher education institutions are ultimately responsible for providing inclusive, equitable, and sustainable quality education on campuses. Regrettably, current progress is significantly lagging such that meeting SDG 4 and all of the SDGs is unlikely (United Nations (2020)). Worse yet, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult for universities to carry out inclusive and quality education, further reducing the chances of honoring their pledges to contribute to SDG 4. In particular, traditional teaching and face-to-face instruction were essentially canceled and shifted to online instruction, leaving the most vulnerable to lag behind (Pittman et al. 2021; Hörisch 2021). Even students with greater resilience experienced distress because of the many months of lockdowns and the fear of being contagious (Cicha et al. 2021). Moreover, as a consequence of COVID-19 stressors, students are

experiencing high anxiety levels (Dhar et al. 2020) that have a significant direct impact on their self-perception of happiness (Yildirim and Güler 2021). Concerning the latter, several scholars have suggested that happiness and related constructs are significant predictors of academic performance, having direct implications to SDG 4 (López-Pérez and Fernández-Castilla 2018; Carmona-Halty et al. 2019; Pulido-Acosta and Herrera-Clavero 2018). In particular, the emergence of COVID-19 has highlighted that teaching technical and scientific knowledge is not the sole necessary condition to become more sustainable; it is not sufficient to achieve the SDGs in the 2030 Agenda. Therefore, the post-COVID-19 era is demanding more novel pedagogical efforts and an emphasis on the social dimension of sustainable development to ensure the continuity of sustainability initiatives, especially SDG 4. The importance of happiness to sustainability initiatives on campus, and vice versa, deserves further research. This perspective paper argues that incorporating the sustainability–happiness nexus into sustainable universities allows us to better conceptualize and implement the social dimension of sustainability, understanding by nexus any connection between sustainability and happiness in any direction.

## 2. Happiness and Sustainability: Conceptualizations

The terms happiness and sustainability converge on their complexity both when defined and when assessed. Typically, this complexity makes solving a particular sustainability concern more challenging. Hence, solving complex problems requires understanding complexity from a broader perspective that traditional tools of reductionism and specialization cannot offer; therefore, it is recommended to involve specialists in several disciplines to explain the multiple layers of sustainable development (Nilsson 2019). To overcome this particularity, complexity management models exist in the sustainability literature to improve the adaptability of sustainability systems to new circumstances (Espinosa and Porter 2011; Valentinov 2014; Willamo et al. 2018). Furthermore, the ability of relevant stakeholders to respond to problematic situations created at different states of complexity depends on their cognitive complexity; the greater the cognitive complexity, the better the proactive strategic responses to sustainability (Gröschl et al. 2019). While recognizing the importance of coping with the complex and multifaceted nature of sustainability, it is beyond the scope of this article to analyze it more deeply. Thus, this section focuses on how the sustainability–happiness nexus can be evaluated within a sustainable initiative on campus. Towards this end, let us start by exploring different happiness conceptualizations.

Happiness is a subjective feeling that has been conceptualized in different ways (Doh and Chung 2020). For instance, some scholars suggest that there are two types of happiness: the hedonic and eudaimonic, which differ from their premises. The hedonic conceptualization dictates that people should pursue as much pleasure and as little pain as possible and the eudaimonic conceptualization seeks to increase the potential and capacities of human beings or the state of being pleased with one's life (Waterman et al. 2008; Raibley 2012; Joshanloo 2014). In this sense, happiness that stems from direct inputs is known as hedonic happiness and, by contrast, happiness that stems from more lasting experiences is known as eudaimonic happiness (Pfeiffer and Cloutier 2016).

Both perspectives, hedonistic and eudaimonic, are associated with the term subjective well-being, which, according to Deci and Ryan (2008), refers to optimal psychological experience and functioning. Furthermore, happiness is also related to and overlaps with life satisfaction (Tandoc and Takahashi 2013). Helliwell and Putnam's (2004) earlier work aimed to clarify that happiness and life satisfaction are indicators of subjective well-being and point out that happiness is indicative of short-term situations and life satisfaction to long-term concerns.

One could accept that a conceptualization of general happiness is one in which an individual is free of cognitive conflicts and biological problems or, at least, can control and positively solve such issues (Hornung 2006). However, there is a stock of literature related to the many different conceptualizations and evaluations of happiness. Broadly, it

is possible to distinguish between those who prefer subjective assessment and those who like to conduct objective evaluations.

According to [Vitrano \(2010\)](#), subjectivists advocate self-reporting of happiness because they link happiness with a particular mental state characterized as satisfaction or contentment. Further, they assure that subjective information plays an essential role in establishing human development policies ([Hirai et al. 2016](#)). On the other hand, most objectivists insist that a happy person meets several criteria or standards that measure personal ideals. Therefore, objectivists trust that happiness data are more appropriate than emotions in measuring human development ([Blanchflower and Oswald 2005](#)).

Similarly, sustainability scholars have also had these sorts of debates about sustainable development. For example, the sustainable development concept, coined in 1987 by the World Commission on Environment and Development in the Brundtland Report, raised many critics owing to the lack of clarity about its meaning ([Ayres 1993](#)), which, of course, led to several misconceptions ([Leal Filho 2000](#)). Moreover, sustainability became an intuitive concept with a minimum technical requirement ([Prugh et al. 2000](#)), thus, hard to operationalize. Still, Brundtland's concept of sustainable development indeed re-opened the debate to foster a steady-state economy based on preserving natural capital over profits ([Daly 1974](#)). The steady-state economic paradigm challenges the tenet of the predominant neoclassic economic theory, substituting natural capital and human-made capital ([Costanza and Daly 1992](#)). Agreeing on the steady-state economic theory precepts, promoters of sustainability in several settings focused more on the environmental dimension of sustainable development than on the other two sustainability dimensions ([Allenby 1999](#)). Accordingly, [Kuhlman and Farrington \(2010\)](#) suggest assessing the environmental dimension of sustainability separately from one social-economic dimension, which they call the well-being dimension.

The lack of meaning also allowed the concept of sustainability to be used in different contexts and academic fields ([Kliucininkas 2001](#)). For example, sociologists started to debate the need to expand the Gross Domestic Product, an essential indicator of a country's overall economic output, as a social sustainability measure at a particular time. Instead, they addressed the need to incorporate the well-being of society as a better sustainability indicator ([Heal 2012](#)). In this context, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) developed the Human Development Index as an alternative to consider people and their capabilities as the ultimate criteria for assessing the development of a country, not economic growth alone ([UNDP 2021](#)). Yet, the Human Development Index is not free of criticism. For instance, it has been pointed out that this index finds fault with incorporating the degree of economic and social cohesion in a country ([Bilbao-Ubillos 2013](#)). This index has also been criticized for ignoring life satisfaction and other human well-being criteria ([Tamburino and Bravo 2021](#)). The Gross National Happiness Index is another alternative development indicator that has captured the interest of scholars, yet it is used just in the small nation of Bhutan ([Pillay 2020](#)), which makes its benefits highly uncertain for the vast majority of countries. In general, these frameworks, and others, always generate debate about the availability of reliable and quality data and their wide range of criteria included in each index ([Chaaban et al. 2016](#)).

Notwithstanding the varied and somewhat fragmented conceptualizations of happiness and sustainability, there is growing evidence to suggest that sustainable development and happiness are closely linked. Furthermore, this potential link may enable more desirable articulations and ways to implement the social dimension of sustainable development. The next section elaborates on the happiness and sustainability seminal work.

### 3. Happiness and Sustainability: Seminal Work

The study of happiness has involved disciplines from philosophy and psychology to economics, biology, sociology, even theology ([Aydin 2012](#)). Yet, the advent of the sustainability–happiness nexus might be associated with the seminal work of ([O'Brien 2008](#)), who coined the term “*sustainable happiness*”, which is defined as “*the happiness that*

contributes to individual, community, and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment, or future generations (p. 290)". According to [Zidarsek \(2007\)](#), the causality and directionality of variables comprised in the nexus can be found in both directions. That means that having a positive attitude towards the environment may make people happier. Furthermore, those happy people may hold an array of sustainability beliefs and behaviors to benefit the planet.

Sustainability–happiness studies have been conducted at different scales, national and local, providing evidence of the importance of this topic ([Paralkar et al. 2017](#)). For example, [Zidarsek et al. \(2014\)](#) reported a positive correlation between happiness and sustainability when happiness was measured in more than one-hundred nations using the Happiness in Nations index or the Life Satisfaction index. In cities and neighborhoods, empirical studies also suggest that self-reported happiness is related to sustainability across several indexes ([Cloutier et al. 2014](#); [Souza et al. 2019](#)). On the other hand, some scholars have found higher happiness levels among people with greater environmental knowledge and concerns ([Ferrer-i-Carbonell and Gowdy 2007](#); [Membiela-Pollàn et al. 2019](#)). Supporting this premise, [Cloutier and Pfeiffer \(2015\)](#) have theorized a framework about the sustainability–happiness nexus. Another angle of the sustainability–happiness nexus advises that a higher level of air pollution is related to a lower level of happiness ([Lin et al. 2019](#); [Zhang et al. 2017](#)).

Other studies, however, find support in the other direction, namely that happiness or the motivation to be happy may drive people to accumulate and consume in unsustainable ways. For example, as individuals obtain material goods, they gain the status of success attached to those material goods ([Manoj et al. 2020](#)). Consequently, they often link their happiness and life satisfaction to those goods and the attainment of more goods ([Caliope Sobreira et al. 2020](#)). This purchased-evoked happiness theory is supported by [Duan et al. \(2021\)](#). A recent study also found that people high in materialism sought happiness via extrinsic unsustainable sources ([Lee and Ahn 2016](#)). Conversely, [Membiela-Pollàn et al. \(2019\)](#) suggest that rampant materialism makes people less happy.

The main findings from this body of work suggest a lot of potential for researching happiness in new settings ([Okulicz-kozaryn 2016](#)).

#### 4. Happiness and More Sustainable Universities: A Future Quest

Visioning a more sustainable university has been a recurrent ambition for higher education institutions for nearly three decades ([Amaral et al. 2015](#)). For the sake of transparency, rectors and presidents choose to conduct sustainability audits on campus to periodically assess the institution's sustainability performance to compare them against pre-established criteria. As it evolved, different normative frameworks, instruments, and tools emerged as universities attempted to deal with uncertainties in their voluntary sustainability reports and thus to meet critical stakeholders' demands ([Shriberg 2002](#)). In this respect, some universities adopted the ISO 14001, an international standard, a framework with generic requirements for an Environmental Management System, as their normative guidance instrument ([Price 2005](#); [Velazquez et al. 2013](#)). In addition, over time, specific self-reporting audit frameworks to assess the sustainability of higher education institutions began to appear. Frameworks that have received more endorsement are the Sustainability Tracking, Assessment and Rating System ([Urbanski and Filho 2015](#)), the Campus Environmental Audit Response Form ([Smith 1993](#)), the Sustainability Assessment Questionnaire (SAQ) ([University Leaders for a Sustainable Future \(ULSF\) \(2021\)](#)), and the College Sustainability Report Card ([Sayed et al. 2013](#); [Ebrahimi and North 2017](#)).

Substantially or moderately, these and other frameworks have contributed to assessing higher education institutions' environmental sustainability performance worldwide. However, none of the current frameworks engage universities to evaluate social and cultural aspects, such as happiness, in their sustainability initiatives in teaching, research, outreach and partnership, or administration ([Ribeiro et al. 2016](#)). Moreover, there is currently little

evidence in the peer-reviewed literature that suggests the inclusion or consideration of happiness into the actual debate about sustainable universities.

Higher education institutions have a historical tradition of creating inter-university collaboration with external society to foster sustainability (Velazquez et al. 2000, 2008). Consequently, most studies relate to societal shifts and trends that determine happiness in a consumer society (Simon-Brown 2000). Regrettably, a few research examples exist in the literature referring to sustainability in campus and happiness. This study reported that students felt happier after participating in an energy initiative on campus (Escobar-Tello and Bhamra 2013). More recently, in a study among Mexican higher education students, the happiest and most academically bright were found to be slightly environmentally sustainable, though more empirical evidence is needed to validate its value (Alves-Pinto and Giannetti 2019; Giannetti et al. 2021).

## 5. Remarks

Universities are struggling to meet SDG 4 before the 2030 deadline. Most of the significant achievements are within the environmental or economic dimensions of sustainable development, but strengthening the social dimension is still one pending task. The post-COVID-19 era demands quality and inclusive education that entails care for students experiencing high stress levels to ensure the continuity of sustainability initiatives. The importance of happiness to sustainability initiatives on campus, and vice versa, deserves further research. To this end, the authors claim that incorporating the sustainability–happiness nexus into the actual debate about sustainable universities allows enhancing the social dimension of sustainability.

Throughout this paper, several insights have been offered. First, the authors recognized that there is considerable flexibility in the conceptualizations of both concepts. For example, in the literature, happiness, subjective well-being, and welfare are often terms used interchangeably to define to express the ultimate aspiration for human beings. Similarly, the terms sustainable development and sustainability have been immersed in this kind of semantic debate. Second, the content explored the importance of the sustainability–happiness nexus in studies conducted at different scales, suggesting that the causality and directionality of variables in the nexus can be found in both directions. Finally, current audit frameworks to assess sustainability in higher education institutions do not require that universities evaluate social and cultural aspects, such as happiness. In this sense, a promising novel framework for assessing the sustainability–happiness nexus has been initially tested.

Previously, the authors have stated that environmental sustainability systems are usually complex; therefore, escalating complexity by adding happiness criteria to enhance the social dimension of sustainability can lead to disappointment and consequently abandoning sustainability initiatives. On the other hand, sustainability researchers have come a long way since the Brundtland Report and they are better prepared to cope with complexity and assume the challenge of incorporating the sustainability–happiness nexus into sustainable universities. Over time, it is possible to enhance the cognitive complexity of sustainability stakeholders to understand sustainability in a broader sense to incorporate happiness as a relevant factor of the social dimension of sustainability, which might allow both concepts to co-evolve.

As stated above, COVID-19 reminds sustainability academics and stakeholders that teaching technical and scientific knowledge is necessary to become more sustainable. Still, it is not sufficient to achieve the goals in the 2030 agenda. Providing inclusive and sustainable quality education will be reached when more sustainable universities consider happiness the ultimate goal of human development.

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