Sustainability and the SDGs in African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Shifting the focus from researching the lacks to existing activities

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Introduction
Sustainability in HEIs has made considerable progress in the last few years. Yet, existing publications on sustainability in HEIs so far have had their focus on the Global North. Studies on this topic in developing countries however have been described as very scarce or even non-existing, the overall theme has been labeled as “rather sparsely researched in Africa” (Okebukola 2017). Darkwa and Edjah (2016) similarly remarked the very few existing studies in this context especially in African countries (Darkwa, Edjah 2016). Lotz-Sisitka (2011) criticized existing research for its focus on what Africa is not instead of focusing on what it is (Lotz-Sisitka 2011), while Kumalo problematized the present “language of deficits” in research considering Africa (Kumalo 2017, p. 18).

Delphi Study
32 experts from 29 HEIs in 16 African countries participated and shared their views considering the different dimensions of sustainability in their HEI Objectives:
1) Investigate current sustainability activities taking place in participating HEIs.
2) Obtain experts’ insights into importance of Africanisation in sustainability activities.

Demographics and Institutional Information
Participants: 18 male, 14 female. 48% affiliated with HEIs of <10,000 students, 32% affiliated with HEIs with >20,000 students. 23 public HEIs, 5 private for profit institutions. Background of participants: Engineering (35%), Education (25%), Environmental Sciences (25%), Economics (9%), Public Administration/Law (6%). Their background is therefore in line with experiences from other authors who argued that sustainability activities in a higher education setting mainly stem from the engineering and environmental sciences.

Findings
There was no clear indication of any leading or any neglected of the four interconnected sustainability fields: Teaching, Research, Campus Operations and Community Engagement. The field “Other” included student clubs, councils and societies.

SDGs

Conclusions
The results of this Delphi study showed the immense importance of the cultural dimension for successful implementation of sustainability activities in participants’ HEIs. Our findings extend previous research: 1) There was no clear indication of any leading/neglected field, which adds to the findings of the GUNI report (2011) stating that physical operations “are not a major focus in African universities” (GUNI et al. 2011, p. 60). 2) Community engagement could not be identified as the most neglected area as proposed by other authors, but has been found to be on par with Campus Operations. 3) This Delphi study found attitudinal factors such as ignorance or resistance towards sustainability activities to represent the main barrier towards sustainability in participants’ HEIs. 4) Local languages have emerged as an important, yet neglected factor in the HEIs’ sustainability activities. The respective research centers mainly focus on these languages as well as understanding indigenous knowledge systems.