



## University–community engagement and sustainability change: Opportunities and constraints for business schools

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### ABSTRACT

The socio-environmentally unsustainable development path in society today indicates that universities, including business schools, are also supposed to play their part in promoting sustainability by fostering university–community engagement (UCE), for example.

Meanwhile, research on the impact of community engagement on sustainability among business schools is missing. Our research aims to analyse the opportunities and limitations of institutionalizing UCE for business schools, especially in terms of contributing to sustainability, while also considering the presence of parallel antagonistic academic and social views on sustainability. The empirical basis for this study was established by the process of designing and institutionalizing an UCE initiative within a business faculty at a Hungarian university. Our results show that a number of factors can be identified that influence the interpretation and institutionalization of sustainability, leading to a situation where the institutionalization of the economic development approach to UCE seems to be the practically feasible option. Thus, business schools' contribution to sustainability is limited to the (neoliberal) status quo approaches with some elements of social reform. Our results also indicate that (1) future research on universities' contribution to sustainability should deepen our understanding of “sustainability” instead of the often rather general and underconceptualized use of this concept, while (2) the presence of competing paradigms of sustainability also means that the question of whether universities contribute to sustainability in general or not does not make sense. The real question is rather what kind of sustainability transition universities support.

### 1. Introduction

The socio-environmentally unsustainable development path in society today indicates that dominant socioeconomic structures largely lack capacity in solving environmental (Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström et al., 2009) and social (Piketty & Saez, 2014) problems. As a consequence, universities today face a dual challenge (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020; Grau et al., 2017): they are

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expected (1) to operate in a market-orientated way (generating their own revenues, functioning efficiently, being competitive and meeting labour market needs) and (2) to act in the public interest, responsive to social and environmental problems at the local, national and global levels and to play a role in solving them (Grau et al., 2017). Furthermore, some argue that higher education should play an even more active role and that universities should undertake the task of being ‘change agents’ in shaping future societies in a more responsible and sustainable way (Sporn & Godonoga, 2024). Several concepts have emerged in this regard, including university–community engagement (UCE) as a potentially fundamental driver of sustainable development in higher education (Leal Filho et al., 2025). UCE is generally understood as universities engaging with external communities to further social justice and sustainability (Hazelkorn, 2016a; Koekkoek et al., 2021) in mutually beneficial ways, which also enrich the university’s primary activities (Benneworth et al., 2018).

Within this broader context, we might identify three phenomena tied to this study. First, universities in general and especially business schools have been criticised for not considering their responsibilities in sustainability transition in a meaningful way (Badea et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2020; Maloni et al., 2021). Second, the issue of sustainability in the literature on universities’ contribution to sustainability is rather undertheorized – the ‘sustainability’ concept is used in general terms in related research (see, e.g. (Abad-Segura & González-Zamar, 2021; Berchin et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2015; Velazquez et al., 2006; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021), without reflecting on co-existing sustainability paradigms with antagonistic conceptualizations and policy recommendations (see, e.g., Dahlmann, 2025; Ruggerio, 2021). Finally, even though there is emerging research on how UCE might contribute to sustainability efforts at universities (Leal Filho et al., 2025), similar research that specifically focuses on business schools is missing.

Thus, our research is motivated by filling the related research gap and aims to analyse the opportunities and limitations of business schools in institutionalizing UCE, especially in terms of contributing to sustainability, with an eye to antagonistic scientific and social views on sustainability. Our research question is as follows: What are the opportunities and limitations of business schools in institutionalizing UCE in terms of contributing to sustainability?

The empirical basis for answering this research question is provided by the case study of a process of designing and institutionalizing a UCE initiative in a business faculty at a Hungarian university.

Thus, we first introduce our theoretical and conceptual framework with a focus on the core concepts in this study: the diverse scientific conceptualization of the sustainability concept; the role of universities and especially of business schools in enhancing sustainability; and UCE and its relation to different views/paradigms of sustainability. Next, we present the empirical case and the research process. Our results are followed by a discussion and indications of the implementation process, with concluding remarks and further research directions.

## 2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

### 2.1. Multiple views on sustainability and sustainable development

In a broad and general sense, sustainability and sustainable development as macro-level (global) concepts were initially conceptualized as intergenerational justice: overcoming social and environmental imbalances so the ability of future (and present) generations is not compromised to meet their own needs. Later on, conceptualization also extended to issues of intragenerational justice. However, when it comes to the details (e.g., in relation to the development paths or policy measures that potentially support sustainability), sustainability and sustainable development are conceptualized and operationalized in diverse ways (see, e.g., (Glavič & Lukman, 2007; Gould et al., 2015; Hajian & Jangchi Kashani, 2021; Hopwood et al., 2005; Ilge & Schwarze, 2009; Ruggerio, 2021).

As a result of the complexity of sustainability as both a socioeconomic challenge and a scholarly concept, its conceptualization and operationalization is not only diverse, but might even be antagonistic. This antagonistic conceptualization is most thoroughly analysed in Hopwood et al. (2005).

*In the status quo approach to sustainability* (Hopwood et al., 2005), ‘development’ practically equals economic growth, and the ‘free market’ is considered to be effective in addressing sustainability challenges. The sustainability of development processes depends on individual choices and lifestyles. That is, macro-level processes can be derived from the values and actions of micro-level actors (methodological individualism). Such a conceptualization (problem interpretation) is reflected in neoclassical welfare economics (Gowdy & Erickson, 2005) and strong techno-optimism (Danaher, 2022), for example.

Meanwhile, according to the *reform approach to sustainability* (Hopwood et al., 2005), although the relationship between nature and humans is currently characterised by serious problems, unsustainability is not rooted in the structure of society, but in existing information gaps and imbalances. This approach can also be clearly observed within weak sustainability thinking (Cabeza Gutiérrez, 1996; Ruggerio, 2021), (neoclassical) environmental economic thinking (Ilge & Schwarze, 2009), the reform approach within environmental sociology (Mol et al., 2020) and moderate techno-optimism (Danaher, 2022). Here technology and science are parts of the solution; they help us to solve/alleviate environmental and social problems (techno-optimism). In order to achieve the sustainability transition, governments, international organisations and business organisations (enterprises) must be persuaded to introduce necessary reforms: the market must be regulated and managed (internalizing externalities); energy efficiency must be increased; use of resources must be switched from exhaustible to renewable; and taxes and subsidies must be reconsidered. Meanwhile, in this way of thinking, there is no problem with the current socioeconomic structures (representative democracy, the capitalist mode of social organisation and the primary economic focus on economic growth) in terms of sustainability, since the dominant (powerful) institutions (political decision-making organisations and business organisations) are able and willing to change, potentially leading to a transition to sustainability.

Finally, the *transformative view on sustainability* (Hopwood et al., 2005) argues that the causes of social and environmental problems are encoded in the basic structure and power relations of society, as the focus of current social/economic/institutional systems is not on human well-being and sustainability, but rather on the economy, growth, productivity and competitiveness. Ideas about the relationships between man and nature and between economic and social structures need to be completely changed (transformed) to avoid collapse. The social and natural crisis (exploitation of people and nature) and thus issues of intergenerational and intra-generational justice are closely interlinked. Instead of further deepening economic globalization, the autonomy of local communities in decision-making and the use of nature should be strengthened. Rather than assuming that current governments and large corporations will 'lighten up', we should realise that community control of these institutions and hence institutional change are necessary, for example, by deepening participatory democracy and decision-making tools and processes. Change therefore does not come through the 'enlightenment' of those currently in power, but from the direction of currently oppressed groups (such as indigenous communities/minorities, the poor, workers and women), as they are the ones with an interest in it. This approach is characteristic of ecological economics (Illge & Schwarze, 2009), the treadmill-of-production approach within environmental sociology (Gould et al., 2015), degrowth (Kallis et al., 2012) and the environmental justice approach (Figueroa, 2022).

## 2.2. Sustainability issues in higher education and the responsibility of business schools

Over the last two decades, there has been a growing consensus that universities are crucial actors in promoting sustainability (Bizerril et al., 2018; Daub et al., 2020; Gröschl & Gabaldon, 2018). Research suggests that higher education institutions can contribute to a more sustainable economy and society due to their dual role: first, they can create relevant knowledge and transfer it to society, and, second, they can prepare their students to be responsible citizens and decision-makers in the future (Stough et al., 2018). They should thus provide a safe place to build alternative ideas and new ways of thinking and enhance openness and inclusivity among their students (Facer, 2022), these being crucial elements of sustainable development. Furthermore, universities could support sustainable development not only through education and research but also through their decision-making processes and infrastructure. They can thus guide actions towards sustainability throughout the entire university system, including education, research, campus operations, community outreach, assessment and reporting (Lozano et al., 2015; Trevisan et al., 2024).

However, the concept of sustainability in the literature on universities' contribution to sustainability is rather undertheorized. In particular, comprehensive models and empirical studies (see, e.g. (Abad-Segura & González-Zamar, 2021; Berchin et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2023; Lozano et al., 2015; Velazquez et al., 2006; Žalėnienė & Pereira, 2021)), use the concept of 'sustainability' in general terms, without reflecting on its co-existing paradigms with antagonistic conceptualizations and policy recommendations (see section 2.1).

In addition to the general lack of a meaningful conceptualization of 'sustainability' within research on universities' contribution to sustainability, there is a special angle of sustainability, when we focus on business schools (Snelson-Powell et al., 2020). Namely, through the various levels of management education, they play an essential role in forming how future generations learn business practices (Wu et al., 2015). They can thus be actors who ensure that responsible leaders work together to support sustainable development (Badea et al., 2020), or they can hinder this change by maintaining unsustainable business practices (Beusch, 2014). Nevertheless, research shows that business schools have been slower in this regard than other higher education institutions (Barber et al., 2014; Rocha et al., 2021).

However, there are signs that business schools have recognised the need to adapt their curricula and operations to meet changing social and economic demands. For example, many institutions signed up to different charters and initiatives that potentially signal their commitment to responsible business education, such as the United Nations Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), which sets out six principles that encompass the values that must be addressed in sustainable management education (Snelson-Powell et al., 2020). As of 2024, there are more than 800 signatories (<https://www.unprme.org/about>). Another example is the AACSB, the accrediting body for business schools, which now identifies sustainability as an important knowledge area (AACSB, 2020). Aldhaen and Braendle (2025) have demonstrated the direct and indirect effects of AACSB accreditation on sustainability among business schools, although the results show that the economic aspects seem to be more prominent and direct than social and environmental dimensions. Furthermore, there is growing attention on responsible and holistic management education, but it concentrates typically on Europe and North America and focuses mainly on UN SDGs, corporate social responsibilities, curricula and pedagogical practices (Narong, 2025).

Despite these steps, there is considerable variability among the responsible practices of business schools (Slager et al., 2020). Some researchers report noticeable progress (Lozano et al., 2015), and others even document 'breakthroughs' (Fritz et al., 2025). Still others indicate that business schools are only at the starting line (Badea et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2020; Maloni et al., 2021). Furthermore, discrepancies between communication and action have been observed (Maloni et al., 2021). Even communication about sustainability seems to be rather general or economy-focused, as shown in an analysis by Csillag et al. (2022) about the appearance of sustainability in the external communication of highly ranked business schools.

Additionally, not only are external communication and educational practices on sustainability ambivalent, but research shows that business school staff members are also contesting the legitimacy of sustainability issues and often misunderstand and undervalue the concept (Slager et al., 2020). Naeem and Neal (2012) claim that even when staff recognise the importance of sustainability issues, they fail to integrate them due to apathy or a lack of appropriate teaching resources. Tahmassebi and Najmi (2025) reached a similar conclusion in their recent research about five high-ranking business schools in Iran. Furthermore, members of staff may still be ill-equipped to address fundamental sustainability issues (Schlegelmilch, 2020).

In addition to research and education, there is an important area where universities and business schools can promote

sustainability: through community engagement. Reyes (2018) highlights the role of higher education in promoting local development. Spânu et al. (2024) stress that through long-term engagement with the local community, universities can truly understand the needs and priorities of the region and tailor their activities for the most impact so that university education programmes and innovation activities integrate with sustainability-orientated local development. Community engagement can also provide opportunities for students and staff members to gain real-world experience, which can enhance the educational experience and prepare graduates for careers that positively impact the community (Spânu et al., 2024).

### 2.3. University–community engagement (UCE): A potentially fundamental area of sustainability

UCE is one of the potential principal areas of universities contributing to sustainability (see also Berchin et al., 2021; Fissi et al., 2021; Leal Filho et al., 2025). Some researchers study the local sustainability impact of universities in community relations and engagement (Trencher et al., 2014). According to a recent definition, UCE is about universities collaborating with actors (stakeholders) outside the university in a way that is mutually beneficial to all parties and also enriches the core activities of universities. As an umbrella concept, UCE extends to public access to knowledge (dissemination of academic findings); engaged teaching and learning; engaged research; and student and faculty engagement (Benneworth et al., 2018); among other areas. As such, cooperative educational approaches, e.g., service learning, and research approaches, e.g., participatory action research, that aim to support environmental sustainability and social justice might also be part of (integrated with) UCE (Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025), just as cooperation, research and communication for policy development for social justice and sustainability.

The model developed by Hazelkorn (2016a) provides a good basis for operationalizing the potential sustainability impact of UCE. According to the model, the *social justice perspective on UCE* stands at one end of the theoretical spectrum. This understands the role of UCE as a means of combating social exclusion and injustice, an activity that supports the empowerment of marginalized and peripheral groups in society. This approach also incorporates global responsibility and environmental sustainability initiatives. From this perspective, the task of universities is to cooperate with external groups of marginalized, peripheral communities (and their representatives, e.g., NGOs) as well as with environmental groups. At the other end of the theoretical spectrum is the *economic development perspective*. Here, the university is a key actor in “social and economic growth” (Hazelkorn, 2016a, p. 49). Consequently, its knowledge production supports national success and competitiveness. The focus is on intellectual property, innovation and technology transfer, as well as marketing (sales) and entrepreneurship. This approach to UCE is clearly linked to the conventional business-focused approach of the university’s third mission (Laredo, 2007). Finally, in between these two positions exists the *public good approach*, according to which higher education is often seen as a public good (indivisible and non-competitive). Indeed, this is the reason for the community (state) funding of universities. However, in the era of neoliberal globalization, it is increasingly difficult to maintain this public good character (e.g., due to the marketization of university research results and the labour market focus of training). In fact, this is precisely why it would be important for universities to strengthen this public good character through their community engagement. This approach potentially includes both supporting economic development (growth) and promoting social justice, i.e., the two previous approaches to cooperating with peripheral communities and enterprises.

Clearly, these approaches to UCE have potentially different (university) sustainability impacts. Referring back to the multiple conceptualizations of sustainability (see section 2.1), the *economic development approach is most consistent with the status quo view on sustainability*. Development here and the role of universities in it are virtually identical to economic growth: university–business relations are supposed to support innovation for economic growth, thus contributing to development understood as economic growth.

In comparison, the ‘public good’ approach to UCE is most consistent with the *reform sustainability approach* (Hopwood et al., 2005). The ‘anything goes’ nature of this UCE approach (i.e., cooperating with any kind of social actor for sustainability, equity and development (growth), including both public sector and business organisations) implicitly assumes that the current socioeconomic structures (representative democracy, the capitalist mode of production and the primacy of economic growth) do not pose fundamental limits in relation to sustainability transitions and that the dominant (powerful) institutions of this structure (policy-making organisations and business organisations) are capable of and willing to change – i.e., to effect change that leads to a transition to sustainability.

Finally, the “social justice” approach to UCE is close to the *transformational view on sustainability*. Rather than assuming that current governments and large corporations will become ‘enlightened’, what is needed for sustainability transition is community control of these through institutional change, e.g., by deepening participatory democracy and decision-making. Sustainability transition therefore does not occur through the ‘enlightenment’ of those currently in power; it can come from the direction of currently oppressed groups (such as indigenous communities/minorities, the poor, workers, women, etc.) who have an interest in it. Thus, the social justice approach does not advocate working with power centres, but with currently powerless, peripheralized, marginalized societal actors to support social justice and sustainability transition.

These typologies of sustainability (status quo vs. reform vs. transformative) and UCE (economic development vs. public good vs. social justice) serve as theoretical bases for this empirical study at a business school at a Hungarian university.

### 3. Research process and case study

The UCE design and institutionalization process that we present below serves as a case study for this research. The case study method is particularly suitable for capturing the contextual and multi-actor nature of UCE as it (1) is capable of investigating complex social phenomena within real-life contexts; (2) can capture interactions among various stakeholders; and (3) provides a rich, contextual understanding of phenomena, especially involving the use of multiple information sources, such as interviews, observations

and documents, which enhance the depth and validity of the research (see, e.g., Flyvbjerg, 2006, 2011; Glette & Wiig, 2022).

### 3.1. The case

The University Unit at the University Faculty of Economics and Business Administration<sup>1</sup> has a long history of UCE. This area has gradually expanded and strengthened over time, including participatory (action) research processes in collaboration with marginalized groups, cooperative educational processes and the representation of equal opportunity principles in the internal processes of the faculty (for details, see Málóvics et al., 2022).

A further step in this institutionalization process was the evaluation and development of future UCE, which was launched as a grassroots initiative (on the initiative of certain authors of this study as faculty staff members) with the support of faculty management in autumn 2022. The purpose of the process was to evaluate the existing relationships of the faculty with external (non-academic) actors that fit the concept of UCE and to further develop the faculty's community engagement.

### 3.2. The (research) process

During the UCE development planning process, qualitative methodologies were used to evaluate existing practices and formulate potential future development directions. The evaluation process of UCE-related activities started with individual in-depth interviews with faculty (mainly academic) staff (see Fig. 1). Interviewees were selected using purposive sampling (Campbell et al., 2020) to select informants who are most likely to provide appropriate and useful information by possessing knowledge tied to faculty UCE activities. As such, current and previous faculty leaders (deans and vice-deans), heads of institutes (the faculty is divided into institutes) and other faculty units (e.g., the directorate for international relations), and colleagues considered to be potentially active in relation to cooperating with non-university stakeholders were selected.

A total of 17 texts were generated during this process: interviews were mainly conducted with colleagues working primarily in teaching/research roles. The interviews lasted between 38 and 70 min. In the interviews, we asked about the specific ways staff and the faculty itself are connected to the non-academic community based on the typology proposed by a slightly modified version of the TEFCE methodology (Farnell et al., 2021),<sup>2</sup> including topics about the actual and perceived role of the faculty in the community and the wider society; cooperation with non-academic stakeholders in research and education; staff and student volunteer activities; services provided to the local community and the wider society; and structural/institutional support for UCE within the faculty. The TEFCE originally defined community engagement as relationships with non-business stakeholders, specifically those without power, in line with the social justice approach to UCE (Hazelkorn, 2016a, 2016b). However, we sought to assess relationships with all non-academic actors (including businesses), not to narrow the focus of our research to such relationships.

After the first phase of research based on in-depth individual interviews, a census of faculty community engagement practices (an analysis of the interviews) was conducted. This analysis showed that the faculty has quite rich and diverse practices of community engagement activities. Thus, the third step was to collect details of specific community engagement practices related to staff activities. Predesigned templates were used based on the TEFCE methodology, using examples to help colleagues to complete the task. All faculty members were asked (provided an opportunity) to contribute with their relevant practices.

As a result of this process, a document entitled "*Community Engagement at the University Faculty: A Situation Assessment*" was produced, which considered the faculty's community engagement modes in the dimensions of community engagement set by TEFCE. This document was made available to all faculty staff, and two workshops were organised with the voluntary participation of colleagues, both being open to all faculty members, including former and current leaders, researchers and lecturers (with eight and seven participants, respectively). Initially, one workshop was planned, but, at the end of the first workshop, participants expressed an interest in continuing the communication about the issues at hand in the form of a second workshop. This second workshop also provided opportunities for colleagues who had been unable to attend the first one. The workshops served to share (1) UCE-related values (expectations and perceptions) and experiences based on the report generated during the previous research phases and (2) ideas on developing UCE within the faculty.

Researchers who participated in the process (three of the six authors of the present study) felt that saturation had been reached within all the primary data collection phases (in-depth interviews and collecting details about initiatives and workshops) as data inputs (additional interviews, another call for colleagues to contribute the details of their own cooperative efforts and organising another workshop) produced little or no new useful information in relation to the development process and research objectives (Guest et al., 2020; Hennink et al., 2017).

Finally, after the originally planned development (and research) process was over, participant researchers were asked by faculty leaders to become involved in discussions about establishing an *Enterprise Committee* to support the institutionalization of UCE within the faculty. Observations related to this process recorded in the form of e-mails and notes are also included in this analysis.

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of anonymity, we do not name the institution in the paper, but refer to it as the "University Faculty of Economics and Business Administration". Meanwhile, the "University Unit at the University Faculty of Economics and Business Administration" refers to the unit where certain authors of this paper – who reflect on their own work within the paper (see below) – are situated within this faculty.

<sup>2</sup> The Erasmus + project TEFCE (Towards a European Framework for Community Engagement in Higher Education) is relevant to this article in that the participating researchers have developed a tool (framework) to help universities in the EU context to evaluate, plan, develop and monitor their community engagement (<https://www.shefce.eu/>).



**Fig. 1.** The phases of the research process.

Source: Own illustration

This study is based on data generated during the process described above. Our data collection and data analysis methodology has been influenced to a significant extent by the fact that this process was not initiated and conducted primarily for academic/research purposes, but to develop UCE at the faculty. However, in line with our personal and professional values, the process was scientifically and technically sound (i.e., it complies with criteria for structured inquiry) as well as open and democratic for all stakeholders (the faculty community). In this sense, this study is methodologically close to participatory action research and analytical autoethnography.<sup>3</sup>

A hybrid approach to qualitative thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) was carried out on our data sources: on the one hand, it involved deductive a priori aspects related to the research question and the theoretical framework (approaches to UCE as described by Hazelkorn (2016a)); on the other hand, it entailed a data-driven inductive approach as researchers also paid special attention to being ‘open’ during the process of analysis to consider parts of the text which can bring in new perspectives to the analysis beyond existing theory. Results were circulated within the research team and discussed until a consensus was reached.

In the following, we provide the results of the analysis of the collected texts, while also reflecting on the theoretical models that were presented before as they serve as theoretical bases and analytical frameworks for this empirical study.

#### 4. Results

As regards the situation of UCE at the faculty, it can generally be stated that, although there is a basically supportive attitude present, UCE activities (and structural support) are clearly overshadowed by the two conventional missions (education and research). Both the faculty as an institution and staff members feel they “lack capacity” for UCE-like activities after completing tasks tied to the first two university missions. UCE is neither included in the organisational structure of the faculty nor in any of the faculty’s strategies for staff. Moreover, UCE is not among the priorities in the faculty’s mission, strategies or management tools.

However, there are differences between departments regarding their judgement on the academic and educational value of UCE. These are clearly linked to the presence or lack of community engagement within departments. In the institute responsible for business subjects (marketing, management and economic psychology) and in the University Unit, which is active in social justice-related projects, such external contacts are quite common. Therefore, colleagues are practically unanimous in their judgement on the value of cooperation with external actors in teaching and research. Whereas in departments that tend to teach and research in more “conventional” ways (also as a result of their educational and research profile, e.g., one which is relatively theoretical), the perception is less uniform and the picture is more scattered, especially in terms of the academic value of UCE.

##### 4.1. The emergence of the social justice approach to UCE

The faculty currently runs a number of courses that include learning components for students in collaboration with the local community. Typical of these are courses within the University Unit: ‘community volunteering’ courses based on the service learning methodology (Juhász et al., 2021), courses based on the science shop methodology (Toarniczky et al., 2019) and courses with guest lecturers from NGOs. Within the faculty, cooperation with civil society actors in education is almost exclusively limited to the faculty’s University Unit. The only exception is one non-business marketing course, where students work on projects in cooperation with non-academic partners based on their interests. Common to all of these courses is that they do not work with companies, but with NGOs and groups working on social justice and environmental sustainability issues. Additionally, the University Unit staff are conducting participatory research with the hearing impaired (Mihók et al., 2023) and with deprived, segregated Roma communities (Málóvics et al., 2021) – specifically based on the principles and criteria of participatory action research (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

The faculty is considered as a pioneer in the formalization of equal opportunity efforts at the university level. In fact, the issue of equal opportunity is the only one where UCE activities have a formal place in the faculty structure: it is a dedicated function of the vice dean, and the faculty’s Equal Opportunity Committee also provides a formal platform for related issues and initiatives. However, even with such a formal structure in place, it is quasi-dependent on voluntary efforts and commitment on the part of faculty staff, as committee members typically take on extra tasks and initiatives on a voluntary basis to support equal opportunity initiatives.

<sup>3</sup> It is related to participatory action research (see, e.g., Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014) in the sense that it is a collaborative, open, democratic and social impact-orientated research process that aims to promote social justice and sustainability and in which actions are not only instruments of social change, but also tools for academic knowledge creation. It is also related to analytic autoethnography in the sense that the researchers (certain authors of this study) (1) are full members (interveners, not just observers) of the research team making decisions about the research process; (2) communicate this role transparently in (scholarly) publications; and (3) are committed to an analytic research process that (also) contributes to a better theoretical understanding of broader social phenomena (see Anderson, 2006, p. 375).

Meanwhile, just like other employees, they face a lack of capacity after completing their teaching/research tasks. Nevertheless, the faculty has an equal opportunity strategy and spends on equal opportunity initiatives (e.g., accessibility certification for the Faculty of Economics and a gender equality policy). However, the faculty does not have a dedicated equal opportunity budget, and costs are financed on a case-by-case basis.

In addition to these formalized initiatives, some colleagues are involved in informal ways as volunteers in NGOs, churches or even non-economics (e.g., fiction) journals, and the faculty's infrastructure can be used occasionally by external civil society actors.

#### 4.2. *The emergence of the economic development approach to UCE*

According to faculty management, the needs of the regional labour market are of particular importance to the faculty, and some courses (including a whole bachelor's programme) have been launched specifically in response to local and regional labour market needs. Thus, the faculty runs a number of courses where lecturers work with enterprises as external, non-academic partners. The ways in which sole proprietors/enterprises are involved are diverse: from joint project work through the evaluation of student work (interviews, CVs, project and business ideas, etc.) by external partners to joint research.

Another way to involve external actors in teaching is to invite guest speakers to courses, which is also a varied and regular practice at the faculty. The main forums for promoting extra-curricular participation among community representatives in the teaching and learning process are student clubs, which facilitate the connection of students with external actors in various ways, such as by organising professional (business/entrepreneurship) lectures, discussions and study-related excursions, also with an entrepreneurial focus. Corporate partners' opinions on the faculty's training programmes (e.g., on the strengths and weaknesses of graduates) have only been elicited on an ad hoc basis in recent years, but the establishment of a Dean's Advisory Board has partly brought about a shift in this respect.

Compared to education, the faculty is significantly less connected to business actors through its research activities. From time to time, joint research is carried out with external corporate partners. Examples include research on self-driving cars (Lukovics et al., 2023), research on financial culture (Kovács et al., 2021), and the work of the Performance–Organisational Capacity Relationship research group (Dóra et al., 2022). In these projects, external (corporate) partners play a consultative role at several points in the process.

However, just as in the case of NGOs, informal connections are numerous. A few faculty members act as voluntary, non-formalized opinion leaders or advisers at the request of external business actors. These actors may be companies seeking the opinion of individual faculty staff members on company problems, while the city council also approaches faculty colleagues for advice on economic/business matters from time to time. Others are involved as experts in (economic) development planning processes at various (local, regional or subregional) administrative/governance levels.

External capacity building activities (faculty colleagues participating in external organisations) are also common, mostly also with a business or entrepreneurship focus (e.g., advising/mentoring businesses, training for businesses, and faculty colleagues working in/owning businesses and advising political or government actors).

As regards student life, the most important forums for independent, organised student community participation are student clubs, which are mostly used to provide external connections for students through professional lectures, discussions (external guest speakers) and study-related excursions (visiting external actors and companies), as noted above. In the case of business-themed TDK<sup>4</sup> projects and thesis projects, students usually work on case studies or research tied to specific companies. The Faculty Talent Scholarship, which is funded by the faculty's corporate partners, also links students with business organisations.

The faculty cooperates with a number of external actors to provide teaching resources and venues.

- training courses, courses, professional presentations and joint events with external actors (businesses and chambers of commerce);
- hosting professional events in cooperation with secondary schools; and
- in the case of joint corporate research, indirect or direct access to faculty research tools (e.g., eye cameras and specialized software, such as SPSS, Power BI and NVivo).

The faculty's infrastructure (mainly the buildings) can be used by external corporate partners on an occasional basis, as the faculty management is open to making it accessible to business partners.

#### 4.3. *The impact of the planning process on institutionalization: the enterprise committee*

The colleagues who participated in the planning workshop identified several intervention points that could support the development of UCE activities in the faculty. Ideas included the establishment of a faculty UCE committee; the integration of UCE activities into employee performance evaluation; the creation of a faculty UCE financial fund; the "rewarding" of external partners (not necessarily in terms of financial rewards, but in terms of recognition of partner needs and the removal of administrative-bureaucratic barriers to their involvement); and, in general, regulation of the faculty's external relations. As a result of the planning process, colleagues have initiated changes in the faculty's committee (i.e., decision-making) structure. Members of the long-standing Faculty

<sup>4</sup> TDK (*Tudományos Diákkör* in Hungarian) is an independent research opportunity offered to students as part of institutional and national-level Student Research Conferences in Hungary.

External Relations Committee who have shown interest in and commitment to the planning of faculty UCE processes have reflected on the limited/dysfunctional operation of the committee compared to its designation: instead of dealing with the faculty's external relations in a wide sense, the committee was in fact exclusively concerned with international academic relations. This shortcoming and their own incompetence in being able to broaden this focus to include external relations as a whole were brought to the attention of faculty management. As a result, in September 2023, discussions were initiated to set up a new UCE committee, which was given the working name "the *Enterprise Committee*".

## 5. Discussion

Neither the non-academic relations and operations at universities nor the actions of business schools can be considered deterministic (Király and Géring, 2021). However, in the case we have presented, *the fact that the UCE design process took place in a training institution for economics and business has fundamentally determined its character*. In order to 'make the process work', initiators, who were (are) personally driven by the social justice approach, used the public goods approach to UCE to determine the focus of the design process. That is, they included business relations in the concept of UCE. The reason is that, based on our knowledge of the field, we thought that the majority of the staff have business rather than community (civil society) relations given that the faculty is a business training institution. This assumption was confirmed: apart from the University Unit, a small organisational unit within the faculty, we found that business connections and roles are predominant (although not entirely exclusive). Under the dominant role perception of the staff, including academics, researchers and managers, the dominant partners of a business training institution are businesses. Thus, we had reason to believe that it is necessary to expand the design to business relationships to institutionalize UCE in a meaningful way, to engage a significant proportion of colleagues, to arouse their interest and to provide them with ownership of the process. Our research has confirmed this assumption: business relationships dominate in the perceptions and relationships of colleagues in academic and managerial roles, not independently of the profile of the faculty.

Consequently, *the institutionalization of UCE did not start from the social justice approach, but rather from the public good and economic development approaches*. This can clearly be identified in the document that has been produced, which takes stock of faculty practices; business linkages are in the majority. It is also indicated by the working name of the future UCE committee: the Enterprise Committee. These results parallel what Naeem and Neal (2012) have found in the Asia Pacific region: typically, the areas covered in business school curricula are "business ethics, corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainability in business, social business, and corporate governance" (Naeem & Neal, 2012, p. 65). Very few examples are tied to civil society. Although in our case the head of the faculty who proposed the UCE committee indicated that it would also have a remit for civil society relations, the working name also indicates that the focus in staff members' minds is presumably on business relationships. This is a highly contradictory outcome when evaluated from a social justice approach to UCE and the transformative sustainability perspective, as the latter two follow a fundamentally different conceptualization of UCE and sustainability compared to the former, with often antagonistic conclusions and (policy) recommendations.

In addition to the existing relationships and role perceptions at the faculty (a business training institution) and its staff, *the staff's worldview and knowledge do not necessarily support the institutionalization of the social justice perspective of UCE* (see also Csillag et al., 2022). Transformative sustainability thinking (Hopwood et al., 2005) seems to be practically absent among the staff, a circumstance which is consistent with Schlegelmilch's (2020) observations. It is obvious and understandable that knowledge of transformative approaches to sustainability is not part of the dominant mindset at a business school, as this is not what staff members are focusing on in their education and research activities, as the results of Tahmassebi and Najmi (2025) have also illustrated. This is what Slager et al. (2020) called the problems of cultural fit, that is, the divide between the values and beliefs of the staff and strong (transformative) sustainability values and topics. See, for further examples, the role of business schools in communicating sustainability (Csillag et al., 2022), the taboos in corporate social responsibility (CSR) discourse (Kallio, 2007) and the dominant weak sustainability conceptualization in corporate sustainability discourse (Springett, 2003) or mainstream economics (Illge & Schwarze, 2009).

Our results therefore show that *in the case of business schools*, both the historical ('natural') role (training for the labour market) and non-academic (business) relationships as well as the dominant (business- and economy-focused) understanding of sustainability suggest that, *even with a social justice orientation and transformative values and intentions in mind, implementing UCE initiatives may take a different direction, which is 'shallower' from this perspective*. That is, in the case of business schools, several factors facilitate the reinforcement of the neoliberal worldview and only incorporate aspects of sustainability into practices (at least in a top-down, institutionalized way) that are compatible with this view (see Tahmassebi & Najmi, 2025).

This raises the question of *whether business schools can be expected to be drivers of transformative sustainability change*. Is it reasonable to expect institutionalization of transformative sustainability approaches and practices in organisations where the natural role of perception and non-academic relationships is dominantly orientated to the business sector and its organisations, that is, to a social subsystem whose own 'binary code' is profit or loss (Boldyrev, 2013), thus leading to amoral business decisions (Kallio, 2007) and the techno-optimistic, capitalism-conforming bias (Springett, 2003) of sustainability discourse?

This is especially the case since the binary code of business (profit or loss) has also been *increasingly spreading into the academic sphere*. Universities are becoming organisational actors (Krücken and Meier, 2006), becoming responsible for their own management and operations and positioning themselves strategically in relation to their competitors. This, combined with globally standardized benchmarking and the emergence of the education market, is leading to internationalization: from locally embedded social institutions, universities have become 'corporations' competing on the international stage (Hazelkorn, 2018; Shek et al., 2017). Education becomes a service that is internationally traded, and transnational academic capitalism emerges (Hazelkorn, 2018; Oliveira et al., 2025; Ramezani, 2024). The new public management (NPM) approach (Grüening, 2001; Lapsley and Miller, 2024) is spreading,

with public institutions increasingly competing for resources and being accountable for their performance, thus also focusing on the criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, accountability and transparency among public institutions (Larrán Jorge and Andrades Peña, 2017). NPM is part of the accountability agenda (Hazelkorn, 2018), which many (Shek et al., 2017) see as a neoliberal turn in higher education in terms of its practical implementation. In this approach, the main task of universities is to provide the labour market with a suitable workforce. Universities are being corporatized, marketized, commercialized and privatized, as they face general pressure to generate an increasing share of their own revenues in lieu of public funding. Meanwhile, university performance is increasingly measured by quantitative efficiency indicators defined by international organisations (Hazelkorn, 2018). Among these indicators, economic factors and indicators (Shek et al., 2017) and major international (global) university rankings (Hazelkorn, 2018) stand out. The accountability agenda and NPM also have an impact on university governance: governance is shifting in a managerial-administrative direction focusing on managerial performance (e.g., cost efficiency and industry relations) (Shek et al., 2017). Thus, universities are being transformed from public to private goods, competitive firms in the market, with declining public funding, replaced by resources (revenues) from students, research funding, industrial relations and private foundations (Shek et al., 2017). In other words, the 'profit or loss' binary code as a dominant logic and approach is becoming increasingly influential for universities as well.

In the case of business schools, the picture is similarly complex and full of challenges (and, according to some business schools, is probably in the process of a paradigm shift at present) (Schlegelmilch, 2020). The question is whether business schools and business education can (re)define themselves by incorporating new ways and approaches, especially focusing on their social embeddedness and responsibility. The literature provides a few encouraging examples, where new measurements and diverse approaches have been developed and used in business schools (Fritz et al., 2025). In addition, there are international initiatives and accreditation efforts in this direction, but their results are somewhat limited and barely go beyond the economic dimensions of sustainability and corporate responsibility approaches (Aldhaen and Braendle, 2025; Narong, 2025). Beside, the case study of Toarniczky et al. (2019) also highlights the potential transformative sustainability potential of cooperating with social enterprises as non-academic stakeholders within the framework of UCE, as social enterprises are market-based hybrid organisations (Bravim et al., 2025) that also represent the social justice perspective to UCE (and as such, the transformative sustainability approach). A similar approach could be to work on inclusive entrepreneurial activities through UCE (O'Brien and Cooney, 2025).

Further, expectations towards higher education remain diverse: in addition to economic value creation (whose primacy is becoming increasingly dominant as shown above), there is also the creation of human value (beyond the labour market) and aspects related to community engagement, responsibility and sustainability (social value creation) (Leal Filho et al., 2025; Rodríguez-Zurita et al., 2025). Consequently, whether what we have observed in this investigation will change in the future is an open question. Facer (2022), for example, argues that there is a tension between (1) a critique of the neoliberal model of higher education (e.g., the institutionalized sustainability approach in the present case) and (2) desirable (but rather impractical) visions of higher education formulated on the basis of normative criteria and researcher desires. However, as she explains, there is another possible horizon based on both an empirical approach and critical imagination, which can indeed help us to rethink higher education and society in a way that can change the neoliberal trends that are observed. Applying this approach, universities themselves can be the actors that can bring about this change and contribute to actively shaping societies to achieve a more responsible and sustainable future (Sporn & Godonoga, 2024).

Despite agreeing with Facer (2022) that questions about the future are difficult to answer, the present research has not provided empirical evidence that such a change is currently imminent at business schools. Of course, one could argue that this transformative change will come from the demand side through corporate greening, but the dominant business paradigm of corporate sustainability is not a transformative (counter-hegemonic) approach to sustainability – quite the contrary, as the literature (Archer, 2024; Kallio, 2007; Springett, 2003) points out. Moreover, there are serious theoretical limitations to (and no empirical evidence for) the possibility that sustainability expectations formulated based on methodological individualism can lead to meaningful systemic changes (i.e., that transformative preferences among autonomous consumers can induce transformative changes in corporate practices on a massive scale). The reason is that consumers are not, in fact, autonomous with respect to their preferences and choices (actions) in the sense implied by the methodological individualistic perspective. Preferences are not exogenous variables of a given (social or consumer) decision-making process, but are meaningfully explained (influenced) by the decision-making environment (Vatn, 2009). This is an argument for the fact that the sum of individual preferences of 'green' consumers has little chance of having any real structure-shaping power, even in the long term, since the current structures (and powerful social actors within, including influential business actors) have a strong influence on these preferences and actions and seem to be resistant to transformative/structural change.

## 6. Conclusions

In our study, we analysed an UCE planning and institutionalization process in a business school – a potentially key process for universities' contribution to sustainability.

In parallel with the critical strand of related academic discourse, the paper underlined that several factors can be identified in business schools that influence the interpretation and application (institutionalization) of sustainability in a way that is compatible with the business focus of the neoliberal worldview. Furthermore, transnational academic capitalism also seems to support the establishment of status quo. These tendencies lower the chances of institutionalizing the social justice approach to UCE and thus promoting transformative sustainability change.

The aforementioned also mean that because of the diversity of approaches in relation to sustainability, in case researchers want to meaningfully understand the sustainability impact (role) of universities (including business schools), they should leave behind the

generalized, undertheorized and under-conceptualized use of the sustainability concept. Investigating whether universities contribute to sustainability 'in general' does not make sense because of the lack of scientific consensus on what 'sustainability' is and related policies, as parallel paradigms of sustainability show. Research should instead focus on what sustainability paradigm(s) university initiatives on sustainability support and the reasons behind it to gain a better understanding of the role of universities in sustainability transitions.

Furthermore, as the case illustrates from a practical point of view, the spread of the transformative approach to sustainability through UCE cannot be supported by imposing mandatory regulations on business schools and their staff, especially considering the limits of top-down initiations where they are not in line with university staff's knowledge, norms and motivation (Wahyuni & Málóvics, 2023). Therefore, the focus of higher education management and department leaders should rather be on providing opportunities to (groups of) individuals and initiatives that already work in the transformative/social justice vein within business schools. Another venue for enhancing the transformative sustainability potential could lay in cooperating with social enterprises as non-academic stakeholders within the framework of UCE. Through collaborations focusing on inclusive entrepreneurial activities, these partnerships can be useful for business schools while also representing the social justice perspective to UCE.

In addition, a publicly available shared collection of good examples, successful applications and fruitful initiatives of UCE practices at business schools could help both the academic researchers and university managers to shape their community engagement in a responsible and future-oriented way.

Finally, a clear limitation of our study lies in the reliability and generalizability of our results that are of course tempered by the case study nature of our research and the fact that, although our empirical results confirm similar conclusions of other researchers, the higher education sector is still not homogeneous. Nonetheless, this case can be a starting point of a longitudinal research at this University or comparisons with other business schools UCE-related experiences.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**György Málóvics:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Zsuzsanna Margit Géring:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Zoltán Bajmócy:** Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Data curation. **Judit Juhász:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Methodology, Data curation. **Sára Csillag:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization. **Gábor Király:** Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

In preparing this study, the author(s) used the WriteFull program to produce a translation from Hungarian to English for the initial version of the paper. After using this tool/service, the author(s) reviewed and edited the content as required and take(s) full responsibility for it.

### Declaration of interest statement

There's no financial/personal interest or belief that could affect authors' objectivity.

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### Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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