

Research Method in Sustainability for Higher-Degree Education

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Abstract

This work offers a new conceptual framework for sustainability research for higher degree education (master and PhD), and discusses emerging transdisciplinary research in order to address real problems of sustainability. It is anticipated that the new framework will assist researchers to design, develop and conduct research. It takes the perspective of providing formative advice for people new to transdisciplinary research in sustainability. It presents a summary of tips and techniques to guide researchers' decision-making. It also intended to serve as a guide for practitioners and novice researchers in applying and integrating the research design typology layers into a scholarly manuscript.

Keywords: Sustainability; New framework; Transdisciplinary research; Multi-criteria analysis; Pressure-state-indicators analytical framework; Higher degree education

Why Undertake Research into Sustainability?

Research into sustainability is an intellectual inquiry rooted in and shaped by research and cultural traditions through multiple ways of viewing the educational world we operate in. Research into sustainability is transdisciplinary and has recently been described as the edge of marginalization [1-4]. It is expected in transdisciplinary sustainability research that a researcher uses a broad range of methods for knowledge integration and production. No specific set of tools is required to process phases or integrate different types of knowledge [2,5]. To address the real problem of sustainable living, a new conceptual framework is necessary, which is discussed in this article.

Zsolnai [4] stressed that progressive businesses that seek to serve society, nature, and future generations, while maintaining their productivity and efficiency should be concerned with the sustainability of their business, and the ecosystem of their industry and its business model. The business model is how a company creates (and destroys) values in the broad socio-ecological context. The whole-picture view of the mechanism of value creation and destruction is crucial to studying the role enterprises play in society and nature at large [4,6]. Sustainability, or sustainability science, is relatively new, having developed the last 10 years as part of the sustainable human progress paradigm [7,8], and has high potential for development [1,9]. It draws on theory and practice from environmental science, ecological economics, and social science [2,6], which overlap to some extent, requiring the integration of tangible and intangible criteria, and a transdisciplinary research approach [10].

Sustainability research in a globalizing world requires understanding the various disciplines-i.e., environmental science, economics, social science, marketing, society [11-13]. The development of understanding requires researchers to navigate, filter, and evaluate different levels of information from the various disciplines [11,14]. In order to create value (bring solutions to real problems), researchers must assess the level of information required [1]. A traditional barrier in sustainability research is the ability to integrate tangible and intangible data-sustainability criteria. Tangible data is frequently available from the economic field and outcomes are relatively easy to measure and predict by analyzing significant data volumes. Other data relevant to social and cumulative environmental impact are less assessable, and sometimes difficult to consolidate into measurable criteria because of researchers' value judgements and limitation in data analysis techniques [15,16]. The aim of this study is to suggest ways in which data can be gathered from the field. Qualitative, quantitative and mixed approaches are considered.

Understanding the Sustainability Concept

Sustainability in business, society, the economy, and environmental management practice are becoming the forefront issue for researchers, practitioners, and companies worldwide. Sustainability is difficult to study because the concept involves relevance to time, space, and location [11,14]. Moreover, it relates to uncertain positive and negative consensuses of sets of events or actions. Sustainability research delves into layers of cultural and spiritual knowledge, which are frequently difficult to define or uncover [4,17]. In emphasising the important relationship between biophysical, spiritual and socio-cultural systems, discriminating between what is more and what is less certain about the future, and emphasising the need for caution in uncertainty, our interpretations mirror closely those of sharp objects [18]. Sustainability research is often focused on potential improvements in business practices, long-term sustainability-prosperity without compromising future generations [4,17]. Some of the key, current definitions of sustainability expressed in recent publications [4,17] are:

- a) Sustainability is a revolution in thinking.
- b) Sustainability fixes a decline in public morality.
- c) Sustainability is an effective economic investment, the invisible hand of the market.
- d) Sustainability is the new capitalism, which is more sustainable, and more just.

Sustainability includes relationships between thinking and reality. Since knowledge of reality is inaccessible to some, critical thinking is the best approach to learning about it. Sustainability is a multi-dimensional concept, and its attributes include systems behaviour, time, space, uncertainty, and cumulative impacts [4,7,17]. A number of principles and methods have been developed to help decision-makers determine the extent to which progress towards sustainability is being achieved [8]. An assessment of sustainability should include:

- a) Systemically providing a sense of the total system, not just the parts.
- b) Goal-directed assessment on improving the condition of people and organisations, meeting needs and having choices.
- c) Hierarchical grouping of indicators into sets and arranging them from the particular and local to the more general and universal (climate change). A hierarchy allows indicators to be aggregated, enabling determination of whether the overall system is improving.

Sustainability is linked with wisdom, frugality, and having a long-term vision. For instance, interest rates do not just reflect the market price of capital but are variables with important implications for social welfare and the sustainability of the economy [4,17]. stresses that, if it is necessary to reshape economic, political, and religious institutions, there is also a need for something that can restore the sense of shared meaning, responsibility, and purpose. Spirituality should, therefore, be promoted as a public good and virtue [4,17-

33]. This approach should be linked to the practice of spiritually based leadership and a deep sense of social responsibility [10].

Sustainability can be interpreted as meaning non-declining natural wealth. Environmental ethics-developed by Jonas (1984), Fox (1990), Singer (1995) [9], Leopold (1949), and Lovelock (2000), all cited in [31], and others-offer well-established operating principles that businesses can follow to move towards sustainability, including:

- a) Promoting natural living conditions and a pain-free existence for animals and other sentient beings.
- b) Using natural ecosystems in such a way that ecosystem health is not damaged.
- c) Not contributing to violation of the earth's systemic patterns and global operating mechanisms [31].
- d) Business affects the natural environment at different levels of natural organization:
- e) Individual organisms are affected by business through hunting, fishing, agriculture, animal-based experimentation, etc.
- f) Natural ecosystems are affected by business through mining, river regulation, building, and the pollution of air, water, and land, etc.
- g) The earth as a whole is affected by business through the extermination of species, the impacts of climate change, etc. [31]. Climate change is very largely a natural phenomenon that has been under way on the earth for several thousands of millions of years. (At least 2,300 million and, as much as 4,200 million years.) It can be seen recorded very clearly in the geological record, sometimes in such detail that it is possible to work out what was happening on an annual, and occasionally almost seasonal, basis.

The materialistic management paradigm is based on the belief that the sole motivation behind doing business is money-making, and success should be measured only in terms of the profit generated [7,19]. However, new values are emerging in modern business that contribute to a post-materialistic paradigm: frugality, deep ecology, trust, reciprocity, responsibility for future generations, and authenticity. Within this framework, making profits and creating growth are no longer the ultimate aims, but elements of a wider set of values [20]. In a similar way, cost-benefit calculations are no longer considered the essence of management but rather part of a broader concept of wisdom in leadership [21]. Spirit-driven businesses employ their intrinsic motivation to serve the common good and use holistic evaluation schemes to measure their success [31].

Individuals, human society, the market, and the globalised world in which people increasingly find us are changing rapidly [2,22]. However, many things remain the same [1]. Differentiating between these and what is changing will enable researchers to design the correct research methodology and evaluate and filter

various levels of data from various fields of knowledge, in particular, economic, social, and environmental. A research focus could incorporate some of the issues outlined-e.g., how staff create and experience sustainability in day-to-day business, what this means for organisational culture, and how individuals experience it [3].

Transdisciplinary Research is Multi-Dimensional and Multi-Purpose

Transdisciplinary research comprises research efforts conducted jointly by investigators from different disciplines to create conceptual and theoretical innovations that enable investigation and movement beyond a discipline-specific approach to address a common problem [2]. It dissolves the boundaries between conventional disciplines and organizes teaching and learning around the construction of meaning in the context of real-world problems [2,10]. The research needs to be designed to the pre-conceived answer. For example, if the aim is to predict the impact of economic figures on sustainability, meaningful economic data and trends should be selected, starting with a single measure. Honan et al. [20] and Hunt [23]. However, society-level, social value

data are often inferred from the community, which is embedded within a specific culture. For researchers new to the field, there is a potential danger from observing the behaviors of individuals and communities who comply with society’s laws and may appear to have adopted its values [14,24]. The level of research conducted must be commensurate with the sampling frame in order to produce comparable results [25,26]. Data gathered from various fields need to be evaluated before being integrated into sustainability criteria and linked to the project objectives.

On 19 August 2019, the US Business Roundtable released a statement affirming businesses’ commitment to more sustainable business practices and value creation in five essential ways (Table 1) -A broad range of stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, and communities [27]. A strong Environmental, Social, And Governance (ESG) proposition links to value creation. The thinking above leads to questioning the focus of the research. The research problem and context must be defined carefully, as the way in which they are framed can both interfere and be influenced by the research paradigm [10].

Table 1: Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) Proposition Links to Value Creation (adapted from McKenzie as cited in Henisz et al. (2020)).

	Strong ESG proposition	Weak ESG proposition
Top-line growth	Attract B2B and B2C customers Develop more sustainable products	Loss of customers through poor sustainability practices (human rights, supply chain) or perception of unsustainable/unsafe products
	Achieve better access to resources Strong community and government relations	Loss of access to resources (including from operational shutdown) as a result of poor community and labour relations
Cost reductions	Lower energy consumption	Generate unnecessary waste and pay correspondingly higher waste-disposal costs
	Reduce water intake	Expend more on packaging costs
Regulatory and legal intervention	Achieve greater strategic freedom through deregulation	Suffer restrictions on advertising and points of sale
	Subsidy and government support	Incur fines, penalties, and enforcement actions
Productivity uplift	Boost employee motivation	Deal with “social stigma”, which restricts talent pool
	Attract talent through greater social credibility	Lose talent as a result of weak purpose
Investment and asset optimisation	Enhance investment returns by better long-term capital allocation (more sustainable plant and equipment)	Suffer stranded assets as a result of premature write-downs
	Avoid investments that may not pay off because of longer-term environmental issues	Fall behind competitors that have invested to be less “energy-hungry”

It is important to consider the research context [26]. Thinking about the research will be influenced strongly by the prevailing culture of the local society and understanding of research objectives and practicality is based largely on western concepts of social structure and ethical purpose [26,27]. In order to understand the research problem more fully, researchers must review the existing research-based knowledge, and the theoretical and conceptual areas relating to the area chosen [23]. As the research focus becomes clear and questions are framed, two important issues need addressing: ensuring that the investigation is reliable and valid, and identifying the ethical issues presented [28]. The recommendations of the US

- National Research Council of [28], which that good research:
- a) poses important questions that are possible to answer;
 - b) relates to available theory and tests it;
 - c) uses methods allowing direct investigation of the questions;
 - d) creates a coherent, explicit chain of reasoning leading from finding to conclusion;
 - e) is replicable and fits easily into synthesis; and

f) is disclosed to critique.

A good place to start transdisciplinary research in sustainability is to use environmental planning techniques, which can assist in developing commonality of understanding of the problem between industry and academia, and community and government. Some techniques include multi-criteria analysis, pressure-state-indicators, analytical frameworks, forecasting, and

goal achievement matrices. All of these are useful in sustainability research for mapping the conceptual framework: what is known and unknown, and what is more or less important. There are many problems associated with transdisciplinary research, ranging from the most evident, that different measures are applied to economies and the environment, to the underlying politics of selecting specific criteria to foster a specific research agenda. Table 2 gives an example of three levels of analysis using multi-criteria analysis.

Table 2: Multi-Criteria Analysis.

Level of Analysis		
1	2	3
Economic	Cost reduction	Reducing energy consumption
	Productivity uplift	Reducing water use
	Investment optimisation	Attracting customers with more sustainable products
	Asset optimisation	Enhancing investment returns by better long-term capital allocation
	Top-line growth	Avoiding investment that may not pay off because of longer-term environmental issues
	Boosting employer motivation	
	Earning subsidies and government support	
	Enhancing investment returns	
	Improving capital allocation	
Environmental	Reducing energy consumption	Frugal innovation
	Reducing water consumption	Eco-design
	Reducing greenhouse gas emissions	Re-using
		Recycling
	Re-purposing	
Social	Consumer attitude	Attracting talent through social credibility
	Consumer education	Achieving better access to resources through stringent community and government relations
	Product design	

Economic - What economic data need to be selected for the research be credible? What level of data is required for it to be consolidated with environmental and social data? Economic data are measurable and can be verified through various reliable sources. Social - What kind of social data need to be selected or studied for the research to be credible and lead to meaningful conclusions? Environmental - When considering sustainability, reliable environmental data could become unreliable in the longer-term or when it is integrated into the sustainability matrix. This research map- (Table 2) -will lead to important research questions. It will, however, assist in allocating the available theory and testing it. The research methodology is suggested in Table 3.

Discovery Analysis Leads to Research Questions

Kenneth [1] & Brandt [10] point out that research is a seemingly linear process, from initial consideration of the problem and purpose to the approach and design, through to data collection and analysis in practice. The thought processes, choices and actions are all interdependent, and the researcher may move back and forth, considering analysis alongside research design and ethical issues, together with research and outcomes [10]. Moreover, while what it

was wished to discover might have been set out, the most important findings may have been neither sought.

Valuing Research Outcomes: Philosophy and Cultural Traditions

Another issue for sustainability research data and design is philosophical approaches to research conduct. Some cultures rely heavily on “hard” quantitative research methods and place less value on either “soft” methods or a combination. In sustainability research, attention should be given to “soft” qualitative research methods, for instance survey Brennan [4] notes that a qualitative research study may not have the same level of acceptance as one that is quantitative in some societies, and research practices focus on more quantitative research methods. This issue is associated with the concept of paradigms-ways of viewing the world-and, therefore, research practices [18]. Research can be founded on many paradigms, the majority of which can be categorised into three domains: positivistic (positivism and post-positivism); interpretivist (criticism and constructivism); and action/participatory. There is no need here for extensive debate about the rights and wrongs of various approaches and methods, the point is

that cultural traditions lead to such viewpoints and that alternative perspectives may be needed in relation to research. If truth exists and can be found (positivism), the researcher may need to consider the findings from other perspectives that may have been used in divining the truth (constructivism). “Your” truth and “my” truth are not “our” truth (interpretivism). In transdisciplinary research, it pays to check assumptions at the outset. For all research, this is a key issue that researchers need to understand and examine for its impact on the outcomes [2,29].

Epistemology is the study of knowledge-i.e., what is known and how it can be known. Each culture has its own research traditions and has developed ways that research is expected to be conducted over time [22]. For example, in Hong Kong, the “traditional” concept in epistemology is associated with certainty and expert knowledge and is overtly put into opposition with constructivism [25]. Epistemology informs research in three main ways:

- a) Beliefs about the nature of knowledge, how it can be structured and the forms that it can take. For example, extensive “qualitative” field notes have no value if nobody accepts them as a form of knowledge.
- b) Beliefs related to the nature of knowledge, including how to evaluate and judge criteria for its construction. For example, if only established experts or elders have the social authority to “own” and disseminate knowledge, research will be very difficult for emerging researchers, because authority should not be challenged. This is particularly relevant in relation to Confucian heritage – e.g., in China, Korea, and/or Japan.
- c) Beliefs about knowledge within the cultural context, and how it might be viewed (lens or paradigm) and conveyed to others (communication). For example, can a person deeply embedded in the culture actually understand it from an external point of view? Can a person who has never previously experienced a culture understand it fully? Can culture be conveyed to others at all? [31].

These issues and differences lead to two questions:

- a) how can sustainability be understood if most knowledge is collected from beliefs (in particular, social aspects) and constructed social reality instead of eco-reality?
- b) will sustainability reflect anything except the socially constructed reality (illusion)?

To be aware of the source’s epistemological stance, it is necessary to be open to alternative viewpoints throughout the research, from conceptualisation to analysing the data and writing the results. Bias is not “bad” unless it is unrecognised and cannot be accounted for in the research. Some form of bias is always evident in all forms of research. Epistemology and ontology are inputs to axiological positions-i.e., the philosophical foundations against which any research is valued. An emerging researcher should be aware of the potential for differences to be evidenced throughout the research process and to consider different viewpoints. Table 4 is a summary of the impacts of the paradigm and philosophical approaches on sustainability research.

Ethical Dilemmas and Multi-Disciplinary Sustainability Research

Sustainability research can be very complex- (Tables 1-4). Cultural differences and similarities can be found within and between each and all of these. The philosophical foundations of research are not universal, and different cultures have different research traditions, which influence how people see and value it. There are many paradigms at play in sustainability, and those described here are only the start. Those wishing to examine the underpinning philosophies affecting research projects can find a rich source of information in the philosophy of science literature.

Table 3: Research Methodology.

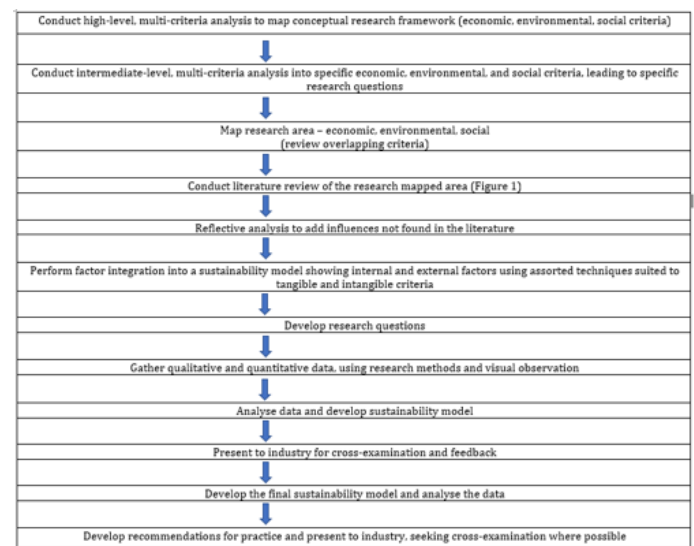


Table 4: Summary of the Impact of Paradigm and Philological Approach on Sustainability Research.

	Third-person	First-person
	Objective	Subjective
Language style	Complete answers - facts exist within the scope of this project	Partial answers - nothing is fact but it may contribute to other understanding
	Control for bias and assume that external influences on the research are controllable	Recognises and accounts for external influences on the research
	People are subjects or respondents	People are participants in the research

Concepts of Proof	Things can be proved	Nothing is "real" except the subject
	Falsification (not proved)	
Concepts of Truth	Absolute - it exists and can be found	Relative - it all depends
		Triangulation can provide a relative point of reference
Methodology	Survey	Interviews
	Secondary data sets (e.g. econometric analyses)	Group discussions
		Observations
		Semiotics
Perspective	Usually, a third-party, externalised researcher attempts to create objectivity	Often self or participant
Types of Knowledge	Concrete	Abstract
	Knowable	Unknowable
	Transferable	Subjective
Samples and Sampling	Can be generalised (to predict)	Purposive (to explain or understand)
	Probability	Non-probabilistic

Note. Adopted from Brennan et al. (2011).

The ethics of sustainability research is an emerging field, as globalisation increasingly dissolves social and geographic boundaries [20]. Researchers need to be aware of the potential for cultural imperialism and ensure that their work allows for autonomy and respect for persons. Informed consent must be obtained, based on understanding by the participants involved [1]. Researchers must also recognise the types of information considered sensitive in the target culture, as well as the possibility that the knowledge they seek belongs to a community that does not want to share it with others.

Members of indigenous communities are sometimes reluctant to provide information to strangers or outsiders [1]. This can arise from family and filial ties, and/or societal or group rights to knowledge. Some communities have rules about who can be told specific types of knowledge. For example, in Australian indigenous communities, elders pass specific knowledge on to initiates only; other knowledge can be shared only with women or men, and non-members cannot be told at all [18,30]. An outsider might ask an offensive question, not knowing that they are not entitled to the knowledge, so an answer will be given but will not be the "truth". In such circumstances, the right to knowledge is not held by an individual and no individual is entitled to share the community's knowledge with others unless the entire community agrees. This can make gaining informed consent problematic [1]. When some knowledge must be hidden from others, finding the "truth" can be challenging. There are likely to be many truths in such contexts: those that an outsider is entitled to know and those that only the community is entitled to. While researchers can assume that no one intends to exploit others, they must work with the community to ensure that they are represented appropriately in knowledge dissemination [31].

Alexander [1] & Kenneth [10] both note that culture is often conceptualised as an iceberg and that many cultural artefacts are invisible, therefore, to someone not primed to see them. Ensuring

that meaning is found and conveyed to others will require consideration of the signs and symbols (semiotics) embedded in the culture. A shared frame of reference should, thus, be established at the start. Academic research is usually conducted worldwide within an ethical decision-making framework using principles that can be traced back 5,000 years [18,32]. This is the key to sustainability research. Ethical decision-making has distinct cultural traditions but differs depending on the specific traditions. The main ethical traditions include Hinduism, Buddhism, Classical Chinese, Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism (Singer, 1993). This study is not intended to contribute to the debate surrounding theories of ethics and their application to research [9]. Nevertheless, it is important to elucidate some of the ethical principles applied to academic research with humans and the social science aspects. APA [28] have developed a widely used set of principles, including, in paraphrase:

- a) Beneficence and non-maleficence-every effort should be made to do no harm during the research and to ensure that it benefits the participant(s).
- b) Fidelity and responsibility-other researchers should not be allowed to behave in a way that can harm participants.
- c) Integrity-researchers should be accurate, honest, and truthful.
- d) Justice-all persons involved should benefit from the research where possible, and researchers should work within their competencies and biases.
- e) Respect for persons and their dignity-participants' rights to privacy, confidentiality, and self-determination (autonomy and informed consent) should be respected, with safeguards established to protect the vulnerable.
- f) Conflicts between ethics and law, regulations, or other governing legal authority - a if ethical responsibilities conflict with the law and/or regulations, or another governing

legal authority, the nature of the conflict must be clarified, commitment to the Ethics Code disclosed, and reasonable steps taken to resolve the conflict consistent with the code's General Principles and Ethical Standards. This standard can never be used to justify or defend violating human rights.

g) Informed consent-those involved in the research must recognise the research outcomes and intentions.

The full version can be found of the APA principles at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code>. They can be applied to sustainability research, but special care must be taken in some circumstances. The first is that some western notions of ethical research may comprise cultural imperialism [20]. For example, the APA definition of respect for persons includes a right to privacy and confidentiality. Privacy is not a proclaimed human right throughout the world and this principle may seem imperialistic in some countries [28].

Concluding Remarks

Putting a good piece of research together is not easy. Sustainability research always involves multiple options, and alternative scenarios and sub-scenarios, and strategic choices must be made. Every choice brings a set of assumptions about the environmental, social, and economic aspects investigated. There can be no right or wrong direction. It is absolutely critical, however, that the choices made are reasonable and explicit [33].

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