Article

Customized Education as a Framework for Strengthening Collaboration between Higher Education Institutions and Regional Actors in Sustainable Development—Lessons from Albania and Kosovo

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Abstract: Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania and Kosovo have invested considerable efforts to tackle present regional sustainability challenges on a research-based and strategic level. This happened through their traditional role as a provider of research and education. Additional activities fostering HEIs as a driver for sustainable regional development and innovation have been initiated as part of their third mission. However, customized education approaches were missing in order to fulfill specific regional demands of different research and learning projects in collaboration with regional actors. This paper explores the recently finished project "Connecting Science-Society Collaboration for Sustainability Innovation—ConSus" which focuses on the efforts of HEIs in Albania and Kosovo to tackle present regional sustainability challenges in both countries. An analytical framework regarding collaborative learning opportunities towards sustainable regional development and innovation has been drafted based on five key elements (capacities of HEIs in regional development, planning, learning and implementation theory, and action research). This framework has been applied to analyze the learning activities of the ConSus project. As a main finding, customized education approaches in the contexts of sustainable development (SD) and collaboration of scientific and regional actors are important elements to cope comprehensively with real-world problems.

1. Introduction

By emphasizing the need for local, regional, national and global SD processes, the Brundtland Report provided a sustainability concept that promoted the importance of: (1) the local and regional level; (2) the participation of concerned stakeholders; and (3) holistic and integrative approaches to tackle sustainability challenges [1]. These principles were reaffirmed in the outcome document of the Rio 2020 Conference "The Future We Want" in 2012 [2].

SD on a regional and local level is important to integrate the global perspective on the local level by linking institutions and networks [3]. In this context, HEIs have become more and more important in fostering regional SD by collaborating with stakeholders from the economy, civil society and public

institutions. Aside from fulfilling their traditional missions in research and teaching, they found new roles of engagement as drivers of regional development and innovation processes [4]. HEIs influence sustainable regional development by establishing partnerships with regional and local communities and stakeholders [5]. Especially within the European Union, this change of perception was guided by several policy frameworks, e.g., Lisbon Agenda, Gothenburg Strategy and the Europe 2020 Strategy, which aim for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth.

These interactions of HEIs with regional stakeholders beyond research and teaching have been summarized as third mission activities, which require additional engagement through their technical expertise, cultural mission, knowledge transfer as well as acting as leaders to contribute to a sustainable regional development based on specific needs of the region [6]. The involvement of HEIs bring several benefits for all partners, such as critical and holistic thinking, knowledge-based products or services, and funding opportunities [7]. Additionally, their role as initiators of actions and bridging institutions might strengthen the regional social capital and innovation capacity, and thus increase the acceptance of results in the wider public.

Dlouha et al.'s [8] description of education for sustainable development (ESD) emphasizes new principles and methods based upon: (1) critical approaches; (2) values based on sustainability; (3) implementation of participative learning strategies; (4) a holistic viewpoint applied in different contexts; and (5) social learning that provides an opportunity for the "emergence" of new solutions within a given dialogue. Seen within the context of the Life-Long Learning Perspective, a new understanding of the relation between teacher and scholar is needed [9]. Table 1 shows some trends for how the transformation between research and education might need to be modified.

Table 1. Changing trends in higher education, adapted from [9].

Shifting from	To Be More Inclusive of
Education which is discipline focused	Education which is inter- and multidisciplinary
Education that has academic impacts	Education which has social impacts
Education that informs	Education that transforms
Education on technological and behavioral change	Education that focuses on social and structural change
Education as experts	Local and regional stakeholders as Partner
Education of people	Research and education with people

Behind this background, the aim of this article is to elaborate how the collaboration between regions and HEIs can be operationalized by further education programs, analyzing an EU funded higher education project in Albania and Kosovo as a showcase. ConSus was carried out during 2013–2016 to foster transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration in further education towards sustainable regional development and innovation, and resulted in the provision of courses, training sessions, teaching materials and a collaboration network of HEIs and regional stakeholders.

Thus, the questions posed by our research are the following:

- RQ1: How can HEIs contribute to a strategic learning environment supporting regional stakeholders and their specific needs in sustainable regional development and innovation?
- RQ2: How is it possible to frame transdisciplinary collaborations between HEIs and regional stakeholders towards the goals of sustainable regional development and innovation?

The article is structured in the following way. In Section 2, an analytical framework is presented, elaborating the role of lifelong learning for sustainable regional development. Section 3 introduces the case study ConSus as well as detailed method for the case study analysis. Section 4 shows the results, which are discussed in Section 5, followed by short conclusions in Section 6.

2. Lifelong Learning in Higher Education as a Contribution to Sustainable Regional Development

To be able to analyze possible collaboration opportunities of HEIs with regional stakeholders, the theoretical context is framed systematically in this section. Therefore, education and lifelong learning as a main function of HEIs are discussed first. This point is further defined with regard to regional engagement by discussing different models of relationships between HEIs and regional stakeholders. Thirdly, elements of HEI involvement in collaboration processes towards sustainable regional development and innovation is introduced as a basis for the analysis of the ConSus project activities. These elements cover the required capacities of HEIs, as well as planning, learning and implementation theories as prerequisites for decision making in regional development processes and the action research approach.

2.1. Education and Lifelong Learning in the Context of Higher Education

Education becomes a critical issue when promoting SD and in improving the capacity of people to address environmental and development issues. Since learning can be seen as a life-long process, education (including further education in all forms such as formal, non-formal and informal learning) contributes to SD by raising people's environmental, social, economic and ethical awareness, and also by instilling appropriate values and attitudes, developing skills and encouraging behavior consistent with SD.

Learning in this context supports people in building frameworks for active citizenship, human consciousness, social inclusion and personal fulfillment. On a local and/or regional scale, it is necessary to develop learning societies who are aware of becoming: (1) persons, not just employees; (2) workers, not only laborers; (3) knowing persons, in the sense of persons who have opportunities to learn a broader spectrum of knowledge; (4) being able to live together, respecting each other and as active citizens seeking to create a better world; and (5) being aware of the need to respect the world and not just use its resources for personal benefits [10]. Therefore, lifelong learning for SD has to deal with both general knowledge and general education, not only with professional education.

Lifelong learning covers practically every aspect of finding and spreading knowledge. It is a type of non-formal learning including the passing on of information, practices, narratives or norms. When understanding education as a lifelong process, general education builds the scaffolding for lifelong learning. This period is important for aspects including: (1) developing the capability for learning; (2) learning how to interpret information; and (3) adopting knowledge of local conditions. These skills contribute to effects on economic productivity, on individual aspects of life such as health, and help to determine a person's well-being [10]. Tertiary education builds knowledge for an information-built society. Especially new, information-based technologies demand skills for diffusing and interpreting knowledge which should lead to people who are able to monitor technological trends, assess their relevance to their environment and help to develop an appropriate regional strategy [11]. However, this is heavily dependent on the willingness and capacities of the relevant actors [5]. Courses held in this context can happen on an individual-to-individual basis, although some of these learning situations have been historically formalized. Lifelong learning contributes to the quality of life of rural inhabitants through several elements such as empowering individuals to become more involved in local policy and decision-making; building self-confidence; enhancing identity and cultural awareness; and improving career prospects and stability of employment. Lifelong learning can strengthen people's capacities for productive activity but may also open new horizons for self-improvement and self-fulfillment [12].

Continuing education in the context of lifelong learning has various objectives: It supports the acquisition of skills necessary to enter the labor market or secure a position in the labor market. It can also contribute to the personal development of the adult learner, expand horizons, improve the performance as citizens, cultivate new interests or improve the quality of life [10].

A "Learning region" is a concept to develop methodological approaches on how to initiate cooperation and community education for and with regional and local actors by combining the

pragmatic execution of learning and regional development. In learning regions, the sustainable advantage is based on knowledge creation and continuous improvement. Knowledge-based actions (production, government, social living together) are based on continuous creation, the understanding of knowledge as a source of value and the synthesis of innovation and actions [13]. HEIs are aligned with the regional development perspectives. Therefore, the learning region needs to be seen as a continuous process to provide the region with a cross sectoral platform to discuss regional and local development for collective action [14].

2.2. HEI Involvement in Regional Development

Various models of HEI involvement in regional development have already been identified. The main concepts include the entrepreneurial university model [15], the Regional Innovation System (RIS) university model [16], the mode 2 university model [17], Agora [18], Third Stream [19], and the engaged university model [20]. They mainly differ from each other in targeting either a primarily economic/technological dimension (entrepreneurial and RIS university model) or the inclusion of social, cultural and societal perspectives in a broad sense (mode 2 and engaged university model).

The entrepreneurial model focuses on commercialization activities of HEIs (such as spin-offs, patents and licenses) and contributions to regional prosperity. This commercialization is also related to a business culture within academia and the development of interface functions such as technology transfer offices [15]. The RIS model is also aiming at collaborative/contract research and networking with practitioners. Additionally, the stakeholders of such RIS seek interactions which lead to regional systemic innovation. In this context, HEIs might play a bridging role in addition to their role as knowledge producers. The mode 2 university model on the other hand pays attention to the contributions of HEIs to specific societal challenges and the interactions with a wide range of regional stakeholders. Consequently, knowledge production is connected and relevant to the environment. Agora describes the problem-generating and problem-solving environment to contextualize knowledge production. Third Stream activities describe activities which integrate social engagement into research and education and are integrated in projects which are institutionally bound on HEIs. In addition, the engaged university model emphasizes the central civic, political and social role of HEIs within their region [4].

To interact closely with regional stakeholders in sustainable regional development processes, Peer and Stöglehner [5] proposed four pathways of knowledge exchange for HEIs depending on varying extents of intensity, levels of participation and direction of knowledge exchange (cf. Table 2): Firstly, as a casual knowledge provider, researchers are involved in workshops or as speakers to transfer their knowledge to regional stakeholders. Secondly, HEIs can provide expert opinions based on certain research questions addressed by regional stakeholders. Thirdly, customized education programs focusing on tailored curricula for specific challenges. This approach is a form of knowledge transfer between HEIs and regional stakeholders, in which both partners define learning outcomes for a specific challenge which concerns the regional stakeholders. Consequently, HEIs provide a curriculum for this demand. The curriculum in this regard is not a regular one but will be tailored to fit the demand of the stakeholder groups and defined learning outcomes. This customization is important to overcome knowledge and cooperation barriers between both stakeholder groups. Fourthly, co-research collaboration can be conducted jointly between HEI staff and regional stakeholders.

Table 2. Pathways of knowledge exchange for HEIs (adapted from [5]).

HEI Action	Knowledge Transfer/Exchange	Intensity
Co-research		high
Customized education programs		
Expert opinion		
Direct knowledge provider		low

2.3. Elements of HEI Engagement in Sustainable Regional Development

To analyze the ConSus project regarding higher education and society collaboration opportunities which focus on sustainable regional development and innovation, elements of HEI involvement in this context are elaborated: HEI capacities in regional development [21] refer to the necessary capacities of HEIs regarding an involvement in regional development and innovation processes towards a developmental role in the region [22]. The three elements (planning, learning and implementation theory) are already applied in environmental und sustainability related planning processes. They provide answers not only on the role of HEIs in decision making processes but also on the generation, transfer and incorporation of knowledge, as well as on the conversion of decisions into practice [5]. The action research approach as the last element is discussed to acknowledge the methodological characteristics of HEI involvement in collaboration with regional stakeholders [23].

HEI capacities in regional development: To initiate collaboration with regional stakeholders, to provide expertise and shape regional development, HEIs need to develop and provide specific capacities. With emphasis on the smart specialization strategy process for knowledge based regional development in the European Union, four types of capacities were identified to describe roles of HEIs in regional development [21]:

(1) The generative capacity is primarily multi- and cross-disciplinary research related and focuses on the support of regional analyses depending on their own research and education focus. This includes not only technical research, but also social sciences and/or humanities. (2) The absorptive capacity means the capacity of HEIs to support local firms in absorbing knowledge, as well as to stimulate the regional demand through educational activities. This requires an understanding of the demand-side (the regional stakeholders) and the ability to react to it through establishing collaboration opportunities. (3) Through a collaborative capacity, HEIs act as neutral regional actors and boundary spanners. This is important as it provides access to existing infrastructure for regional actors ("reach in") and is able to work across the boundaries between academia and regions including civil society and business ("reach out"). (4) Leadership as the fourth capacity focuses on the support of a regional vision and the proposition of joint activities together with regional actors. All these capacities contribute to a broader recognition of HEIs themselves in supporting regional actors and creating networks towards regional development rather than providing research and education as their traditional mission [24].

Planning theory (the role and self-perception of HEIs in decision-making processes): As a basis for decision-making, different theories of planning exist. Rational planning in this regard is a fact- and/or science-based process driven by experts informing the public about the results of scientific analyses. However, the level of value is taken as granted from overall strategies, that can be concretized by scientific thought and are not discussed with societies. This has led to criticism since planning processes are full of values that need a different basis [25]. On the other hand, by emphasizing the communication processes between concerned stakeholders, the communicative/collaborative planning theory proposes a participative decision-making process [26].

By combining positive features of both planning theories, Stöglehner [27] proposed a rational-collaborative planning model. Decision-making in this regard has been conceptualized as a connection of levels of facts and values by aggregation rules. The level of facts hereby means the scientifically provable reality. It is based on certain models, principles and methods grounded by scientific disciplines and actual perspectives. The level of values on the other hand is related to subjective perceptions of the environment that have to be negotiated in society. They are usually connected with judgements and a different awareness of the affected actors [28]. Both levels are perceived and interpreted differently depending on individual beliefs, experiences and associations. It is important to acknowledge and assess the different perception of facts during decision-making processes. By facilitating a constant exchange and communication process, it is possible to raise awareness and balance different views and to close the gap between scientifically provable and perceived realities [29]. Finally, the connection of facts and values should follow certain aggregation rules that should be agreed on in communication and participation processes, but then should be applied on scientific ground.

Learning theory (the operational process of decision-making): Regional development processes involve several affected stakeholders and thus form a learning organization [30] where learning through individuals increases the organization's capacity. The concepts of single-loop, double-loop and generative learning helps to reflect learning processes [31,32]. Single-loop learning refers to rethinking the actions with respect to their impact on process results on, for instance, design actions for satisfying existing governing variables [10], but not on the initial aims. On the second level, e.g., the double-loop learning process, the learners rethink not only the actions but also the aims and visions of certain development processes [3]. The generative learning level finally describes processes in which learners additionally rethink and improve the process itself; they learn how to learn. This also supports learning processes of the organization and requires the review of research processes.

Implementation theory (the transfer of decisions into practice and action): To be able to implement agreed strategies or policies of regional development processes, ownership is important for both the regional stakeholders, as well as for the HEI staff. The implementation theory creates the theoretical basis for the ownership concept by placing important actors in decision-making processes as "street level bureaucrats" who act as sense-makers in the implementation of new policies [33]. Ownership acknowledges the concept of street level bureaucrats as well as their attitudes towards shaping and determining the effectiveness of policy-related instruments, which are also influenced by their own knowledge and values. Three elements are important in the concept of ownership: (1) basic understanding of sustainability values and concepts; (2) techniques/processes of research, teaching and management; and (3) outcomes, e.g., visions and measures as results of regional development processes.

Ownership is also deeply connected with the double-loop learning method since the reflection of actions and initial aims during the process supports innovation and identification with the project outcomes as well as the implementation of strategies [5,34].

Action Research: Along the same lines of thinking, the concept of action research is related to qualitative social research approaches which complement quantitative research methods [35]. This allows a participatory and democratic process with the main goal of developing practical knowledge. It considers theory and practice as mutually beneficial and is driven by three principles [36]: (1) The starting point is the social reality: the main goal is to contribute to concrete real-world problem solving. (2) Action in field research: To compare the different forms of social action, an integration of research into social action is needed. This can be achieved by forming an interlinked triangle of action, research and education. (3) The status of research objects and participation therein: All actors involved (those from HEIs and region) may change their perception by researching and being researched. In addition, participation and intervention based on competencies are important during the research/learning process to be able to effect change.

Customized education approaches fulfil these elements in terms of planning, learning and implementation theory, as discussed by Peer and Stöglehner [5]. These factors might be extended to acknowledge necessary capacities of HEIs on the one hand and important methodological factors for the implementation of the learning process on the other hand. The above introduced capacities of HEIs may be integrated into this concept as it affects all four elements: generative and absorptive capacities (generating knowledge and incorporating the demand side) as well as collaborative and leadership capacities (acting as boundary spanners and supporting the development of a region). Furthermore, action research methods are important factors in implementing participation into the learning process as well as to achieve practical knowledge.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. The Sustainability Situation in the EU Partner Countries Albania and Kosovo

Albania and Kosovo continue to face an ongoing phase of environmental, economic, societal and political transition after decades of political and economic isolation. On the one hand, success has been achieved in terms of poverty reduction, economic growth, and access to education. On the other hand, environmental challenges such as water and soil contamination are still not resolved [37]. In addition, migration from rural to urban areas causes economic and social pressure on cities and regions in the form of youth unemployment, medical scarcity, etc. [38,39].

As a reaction to these strategic and political sustainability challenges, Albania adopted the Millennium Declaration 2000 and the UNECE Strategy on ESD in 2005 [40], as well as the Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals, during the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York in 2015 [38]. Additionally, national strategies have been implemented such as the National Strategy for Development and Integration (with mechanisms to foster principles of SD and society) in 2005 and 2016. Kosovo, on the other hand, was not part of the 2000 Millennium Summit due to its governmental status under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and thus was not able to officially sign the Millennium Declaration. This was rectified in 2008, six months after Kosovo's declaration of independence [41]. In 2015, Kosovo adopted the Sustainable Development Goals.

In terms of higher education, Albania and Kosovo, as partner countries of the European Union, have been integrated into the Bologna higher education process and thus offer regular educational programs in line with the European Credit Transfer System [42]. However, little research has been conducted into the activities of HEIs related to continuing education and collaboration with the external regional stakeholders. HEIs of both countries have committed to tackling sustainability challenges in different ways. According to the Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency [43], Albania has 41 universities, including 15 public and 26 private. In total, 162,544 students were enrolled during the academic year 2014/2015. Among the 39 accredited universities in Kosovo, there are nine public and 30 private universities, with around 122,000 students [44]. ESD has been introduced into HEIs through courses as well as partially incorporated into the curricula, which were intended to promote this topic to both students and university educators.

A more strategic implementation was first introduced in Kosovo at the University of Prishtina ("Strategies of Education for Sustainable Development" [41]) to encourage educators at this university to include ESD into their teaching. Additionally, the NGO Kosovo Education for Sustainable Development was established in 2011 for this purpose. On the governmental side, some efforts have been made to promote ESD through reforms to the educational systems (e.g., Kosovo Education Strategic Plan 2011–2016 and 2017–2021 [44,45]).

In Albania, the situation is similar. Some initiatives exist that promote SD and/or the connection between the higher education system and society at large. The Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) Middle Albania, acknowledged by the United Nations University as part of the global RCE-Network, has been established to prepare an action plan according to the UNECE strategy on ESD [46].

The project U3M-AL, funded by the European Commission, was introduced to support third mission activities of HEIs [47]. There are a few other initiatives supported by Albanian HEIs acting in different pillars of sustainability, e.g., University of Durres, Agricultural University of Tirana or European University of Tirana [48,49]. The integration of regional sustainability issues into collaborative learning activities between HEIs and regional stakeholders was the main objective of another EU-funded project, ConSus [50]. The main goals of this project were the establishment of a transdisciplinary collaboration network in both countries and the development of teaching material, through which the university educators of partner HEIs in Albania and Kosovo, together with concerned regional stakeholders, could jointly tackle specific sustainability challenges.

3.2. The ConSus Project: Fostering Sustainability in HEIs in Albania and Kosovo

Objectives and project partners: Acknowledging the current sustainability challenges and the commitment by higher education representatives in both countries to tackle these challenges, the transnational three-year project ConSus (Connecting Science-Society Collaboration for Sustainability Innovation) has been set up by 13 partner organizations from four EU countries in connection with the two partner countries Albania and Kosovo. The aims of this project are firstly to strengthen the connection of higher education, research and society for establishing transdisciplinary collaboration opportunities, and secondly to provide mutual learning opportunities towards systemic and holistic solutions for sustainability. Specific objectives of this project comprise: (1) the identification and mapping of key institutions related to SD in both countries; (2) the establishment of a regional collaboration network for transdisciplinary teaching; (3) the development of teaching resources for higher education; and (4) the provision of professional training activities for lecturers in higher education [51].

With financial support from the Tempus program of the European Commission, 13 partner institutions collaborated from December 2013 to November 2016 on this project: four universities (two public and two private) and one NGO from Albania, three universities (one public and two private) and one NGO from Kosovo, and four public universities from three European Union countries (cf. Table 3).

Table 3. ConSus partner institutions (own illustration, [51]).

	Public HEIs	Private HEIs	NGOs
Albania	University of Durres "Aleksander Moisiu" Agricultural University of Tirana	European University of Tirana Polis University, Tirana	Center for Comparative and International Studies, Tirana
Kosovo	University of Peja "Haxhi Zeka"	Universum College, Prishtina Riinvest College, Prishtina	Institute for Development Policy, Prishtina
European Union	University of Graz/Austria (lead) University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna/Austria Leuphana University of Luneburg/Germany University of Limerick/Ireland		

Achieved outcomes: In November 2016, the project finished, achieving the following outcomes:

- Identification of key stakeholders related to SD in Albania and Kosovo (Work Package 1): A systematic mapping was conducted to identify stakeholders from HEIs, as well as research and civil societies working in the field of SD in Kosovo and Albania. Members were asked in a survey about their expertise and experience in science–society collaborations, as well as about their needs and expectations regarding a future collaboration network [52].

- Establishment of a regional science–society collaboration network (Work Package 2): Following these needs, the project partners founded a regional network together with regional stakeholders. The vision of the ConSus network is to enable SD through transdisciplinary collaboration and learning between actors from higher education, research and civil society in Albania and Kosovo [53].

- Development of teaching resources for higher education purposes (Work Package 3): To raise awareness about SD and to create mutual learning opportunities among students and within civil society, more than 80 types of teaching material and 25 methods have been described by the project partners during the project. They are published and available for free on a digital platform (details see below) [54].

- Organization of six four-day training sessions for university educators (Work Package 4): The training sessions were dedicated to tackle specific sustainability challenges in both countries by introducing them to relevant SD approaches, visit good practice companies and actively apply learner-centered methods for teaching and learning. The training sessions covered topics such as multi-stakeholder learning, ecology education, sustainable entrepreneurship, regional development, creative and transdisciplinary methods and environmental sustainability [50].

- Dissemination activities (Work Package 5): Seven one-day workshops were organized at each partner university in Albania and Kosovo to share and discuss the outcomes of the project with relevant stakeholders such as university educators, students, entrepreneurs and representatives of public institutions [55].

Central to the project and the main outcome are the ConSus teaching resources: The work package "Development of teaching resources for HEIs" consisted of four deliverables: (1) a review of available teaching materials and methods; (2) resource platform development; (3) development of teaching methods; and (4) development of teaching materials. In this context, teaching resources consist of two types: teaching methods and teaching material [54]:

- Teaching methods are hereby described as a certain teaching activity initially without any relation to a specific content, e.g., brainstorming, games or simulations. They have been described and adapted to the context of the ConSus project by the four EU partner institutions after a systematic review of existent methods offering active involvement for the learners and being suitable for higher education and transdisciplinary learning processes. In addition, "teaching method outlines" (certain sequences of teaching methods) have been developed by the EU partners to assist the partners from Albania and Kosovo in developing the teaching material.

- The teaching material in the context of the ConSus project is described as a combination of a specific sustainability topic and a method or a sequence of methods to offer a learning opportunity for university educators and their students based on transdisciplinary collaboration with external stakeholders. Among others, the partners from Albania and Kosovo developed, e.g., excursions together with regional stakeholders, mini-projects, simulations, games and/or case studies.

Each description of teaching material consists of the following minimum chapters: summary, integration of societal stakeholders, strengths/weaknesses, learning outcomes, relevance for sustainability, preparation efforts, access, assessment, credits, and sources/links. Additionally, downloadable documents are available for each type of teaching material to support the actual application. Typically, they consist of a material description (with the information above), an instruction file (with detailed description of each step) and handouts or presentations.

In addition, the teaching methods consist of a predefined description, consisting of a summary, the type of the method, preparation efforts with short description, necessary documents/materials, integration of stakeholders, possible topics of sustainability, situations appropriate for the method, strengths/weaknesses, assessment/evaluation possibilities, and sources/links.

To classify the teaching resources and to facilitate the search for appropriate teaching material or methods, all teaching resources were tagged based on specific needs such as types of teaching tools

and methods (e.g., excursion, case study, game, discussion, etc.), group size (fewer than 5 students, up to 10 students, more than 10 students, and independent of student number), time required (15–30 min, 1 lecture unit of 45 min, up to 3 lecture units, up to 7 lecture units, up to 1 semester, and more than 1 semester) and social setting (individual, pairs, group work, and plenum).

In total, 85 types of teaching material have been developed by the Albanian and Kosovar university partners (at least 12 by each institution), and 23 teaching methods and method outlines by the EU-partners of the ConSus project. All of them are published on the ConSus teaching resource platform [56].

3.3. Applied Methods

The ConSus case study has been evaluated during the project time by focusing on qualitative empirical social research methods, agreed on in advance by the project management and the internal evaluation team for each content related work package (i.e., Work Packages 1–4). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the work package leads to explore the extent to which the project and its activities will be able to tackle sustainability challenges and foster regional innovation in Albania and Kosovo according to the main objective of the project. These results were combined with feedback collected by the project consortium during the management meetings and the results of a quantitative survey among regional stakeholders in Albania and Kosovo regarding their knowledge about SD (part of Work Package 1 [51]) and expectations about a possible transdisciplinary cooperation structure in the region (part of Work Package 2 as a prerequisite of the ConSus network establishment [57]).

These sources have been used to answer evaluative questions according to the analytical framework with the ConSus project as an example for HEIs facilitating transdisciplinary collaboration processes towards regional development and innovation (cf. Table 4).

Table 4. Evaluative questions according to the analytical framework.

Elements of HEI Engagement in Regional Development	Evaluative Questions for the Analysis of the Case Study
Capacities	In what way do HEIs develop and provide necessary capacities towards collaboration with regional stakeholders?
Planning theory	How is decision-making implemented in transdisciplinary collaboration processes?
Learning theory	How is it possible to implement learning opportunities for affected stakeholders in transdisciplinary collaboration processes?
Implementation theory	How is it possible to transfer results and decisions of transdisciplinary collaboration processes into practice?
Action research	In what way can HEIs facilitate a participatory collaboration process?

Since the actual cooperation between the partner HEIs of the ConSus project and regional stakeholders mainly happened during the development of the teaching material and the establishment of the stakeholder network, the following analysis focuses on both activities (cf. Table 4). Nevertheless, the other aforementioned activities (identification of stakeholders, training sessions for university educators and the dissemination activities) serve as complementary information.

4. Results

The aim of achieving regional innovation towards SD demands certain capacities from the HEIs (cf. Table 5). According to the framework of Edwards et al. [24], the following aspects were necessary for the activities of the ConSus project: to build up generative capacity, the partner HEIs in the ConSus project aimed to collaborate with regional partners and challenges in line with their research focus. This was based on a structured identification of key stakeholders in the region, as well as a survey about their experiences and knowledge in terms of sustainable regional development and collaboration

with stakeholders from HEIs. With regards to the absorptive capacity of HEIs, the main goal of the ConSus project was to contribute to solutions for specific problems raised by regional stakeholders on the demand side. The two other capacities, collaboration and leadership, were part of the established ConSus network. Here, further learning activities and the development of a common regional vision were intended by providing an organizational framework for interested regional actors. This was crucial to provide mutual access to resources, knowledge and other networks.

Table 5. Activities of the ConSus project according to the analytical framework.

Elements of HEI Engagement		Contributions of the ConSus Project Activities
HEI capacities for involvement in regional development	Generative capacity	Collaboration with regional stakeholders based on HEIs' research focus
	Absorptive capacity	Understand regional stakeholders and their specific sustainability challenges on the demand side
	Collaborative and leadership capacity	Network building for further learning and research activities, developing regional learning capacity and lobbying; HEIs as initiators of regional collaboration activities
Planning theory	Facts	Objective: Knowledge exchange on sustainability challenges in Albania and Kosovo and how to tackle them through collaboration between stakeholders from HEIs and regional communities
	Values	Objective: Awareness raising about different mindsets, knowledge, objectives and methods in communities of higher education and regional communities
Learning theory	Single-loop learning	Updates of teaching material is possible based on feedback by other stakeholders (e.g., through comment section on ConSus teaching resource platform, or individual feedback)
	Double-loop learning	Adaptation of learning outcomes and possible activities depending on the regional focus or involvement of different stakeholders
	Generative learning	Integration of reflection sessions in each type of teaching material
Ownership	Values/concepts	Integration of values of SD is mandatory in each activity
	Techniques/processes	Selection of methods for teaching material were made available (method handbook), however authors were free to choose other methods as well; participative methods were preferred to foster knowledge exchange
	Outcomes	Learning outcomes defined by stakeholders (those from HEI and regional communities)
Action Research methods	Social reality	Solving of real-world sustainability problems raised by concerned regional stakeholders
	Action in field research	Application of learning and research methods specifically aimed at integrating certain expertise of regional actors with different professional background
	Participation	Joint analysis and reflection of research and learning results

According to the planning theory (setting of a decision-making process), clear objectives between all stakeholders and their intended collaboration activities in research and learning were jointly agreed during the ConSus project. The HEIs provide knowledge based on their research, e.g., about sustainable agriculture, architecture or innovative management practices, whereas the regional stakeholders bring up their expertise on specific regional challenges. Such collaboration processes also provide discussions about new paradigms and raising awareness about mindsets, objectives and methods of different communities. By facilitating a constant communication and exchange process during the development of teaching material, it is possible to balance the different perceptions of facts.

With respect to the learning theory perspective (which sets the foundation for the operational process of decision-making), all participants (those from HEIs and the regional stakeholders) gain new knowledge about a certain topic and are able to process this knowledge to meet the defined outcomes. To achieve a structured learning process, a certain methodology for each type of teaching material is provided. On the other hand, single- and double-loop learning is encouraged by updating opportunities based on feedback or adapting the teaching material to other regional circumstances with different actors and challenges, and therefore different actions and aims. Additionally, each type of training material should include an integrated method of reflection, which allows a generative learning opportunity for the learners.

Ownership (understood as the basis of transferring decisions into practice) is considered by jointly defining learning outcomes through affected stakeholders from HEIs and the region. This makes sure that the actors are also interested in taking action afterwards and may continue to cooperate with each other. Values of sustainability and SD are required in each ConSus activity. This is assured by providing training sessions on different aspects of sustainability for the university educators of each partner HEI. By doing this, they also make sure that aspects of SD were integrated in the teaching material. Additionally, participatory and transdisciplinary methods are preferred to foster knowledge exchange between the different stakeholders from higher education and region. For this, a teaching method handbook was developed and provided to the participants [58]. In terms of outcomes, ownership is fostered by a commonly defined definition of the learning outcomes.

Integrating the concept of action research was a fundamental part of all ConSus activities. This was achieved through the development of teaching material by aiming to solve real-world problems related to sustainable regional development and innovation in Albania and Kosovo, as raised by and discussed with concerned stakeholders. After agreeing to the research objectives and outcomes, methods were applied with strong emphasis on mutual knowledge exchange of all participating actors to foster holistic perspectives and solutions on specific regional challenges. By doing this, it was possible to integrate certain expertise and the professional backgrounds of both scientific stakeholders and regional actors. The intention of the six training sessions for university educators was also to introduce the participants to these elements to encourage them to integrate participative methods in their teaching material. Lastly, the participation aspect of action research was integrated by jointly reflecting and analyzing the research/learning processes, e.g., in the training sessions or during the development of teaching material.

5. Discussion

RQ1: How can HEIs contribute to a strategic learning environment supporting regional stakeholders and their specific needs in sustainable regional development and innovation?

HEIs are an important factor of regional innovation and SD in their region, beyond research and education. Some third mission activities of HEIs in Albania and Kosovo have already started, but there still needs to be more efforts to systematically develop a third mission strategy on both national and regional level [47]. The ConSus project showed that the development of specific teaching material offered a variety of opportunities to tackle sustainability challenges in Albania and Kosovo together with concerned regional stakeholders. This can happen through discussions, workshops or expert opinions as a mono-directional knowledge transfer from higher education to regional stakeholders. A knowledge exchange however has to support the acceptance of the process results and the agreed measures afterwards.

The main objective of the ConSus project was not only to support regional innovation towards SD but also to foster collaboration opportunities between HEIs and regional actors. Following the specific objectives, four goals have been agreed on, which consist of a mapping of relevant stakeholders working in SD and establishing a regional network in order to enable structured networking and collaboration between these actors. These two goals should ensure a strategic implementation of a third mission in the topic of SD and innovation in Albania and Kosovo. The two other goals were important

to ensure a professionalization of university educators through training sessions and facilitating initial connections between university educators and regional stakeholders. This was achieved by jointly developing a set of teaching material with the purpose of tackling specific sustainability related challenges. Thus, lifelong learning opportunities were provided among the regional stakeholders, especially by focusing on the provision of knowledge exchange and raising awareness about regional challenges in terms of SD and how to tackle these.

Concerning the teaching material, the developers from the partner HEIs in Albania and Kosovo were encouraged to follow three basic requirements:

- Foster collaboration with regional stakeholders: This was to support the connection of HEIs and regional stakeholders.
- Tackling a specific regional sustainability challenge: Most important was the mutual agreement of the topic and the outcome of the set of teaching material between all stakeholders. To get a broad understanding of the situation, the ConSus project partners discussed crucial sustainability challenges in both countries in general. Based on this, the elaboration of actual specific topics in each type of teaching material was crucial to the concerned regional stakeholders in order to find solutions for challenges which concern them.
- Application of participatory methods (as a part of action research): To foster a knowledge exchange between the designated participants of the teaching material, the authors were encouraged to integrate methods and/or a sequence of methods that allow the utilization of the expertise of both scientific and non-scientific stakeholders.

Additionally, the teaching material was developed in a customizable way to enable adaptations for different stakeholders interested in applying the teaching material (e.g., for different regional areas).

These requirements were intended to support and encourage the project partners of the Albanian and Kosovar HEIs to perceive and understand the different roles of HEIs themselves in relation to their environment, i.e., from an expert view with a focus on mono-directional knowledge transfer from higher education to the region towards a mutual knowledge exchange, in which knowledge from regional stakeholders can be processed into new theoretical or methodological developments.

RQ2: How is it possible to frame transdisciplinary collaborations between HEIs and regional stakeholders towards the goals of sustainable regional development and innovation?

This case study shows that a well-structured knowledge exchange between regional stakeholders and those from HEIs is needed to initiate mutual learning processes while working towards regional SD as well as implementation opportunities. Based on this review of the ConSus project and its activities, it is too early to conclude any specific advancements related to SD in affected areas of both countries. Regional stakeholders and those from HEIs have met to plan and describe teaching materials of interest and have also conducted knowledge exchange on ESD during the ConSus project time. A stakeholder network has been established to maintain the connections and to develop strategies and policies related to the objective of the network, supporting collaboration between scientific and regional stakeholders towards sustainable regional development and innovation in Albania and Kosovo.

Key elements of learning activities in regions that has been concluded out of the analysis of the case study are the following:

- Capacities of HEIs need to be developed to acknowledge and react to the specific challenges of regional stakeholders in terms of SD depending on their research and education focus. The development of collaborative capacities and leadership through the establishment of regional networks can maintain or even increase regional connections to civil society, companies and public institutions, and encourage ideas for developing additional learning activities.
- Concerning the planning perspective, the regional learning activities enable transdisciplinary collaboration opportunities between different communities with the objective to tackle concrete sustainability related challenges. Additionally, these communities, who might not necessarily be

familiar with each other, obtain mutual lessons about different expertise, professional background and goals.

- Considering the learning perspective, learning activities might be designed to support single and double loop learning in order to adapt the learning outcomes and the processes involved. This also leads to the adaptation of possibilities for other areas as well. Hence, other university educators interested in the topic have the chance to use the types of teaching material, e.g., by keeping the general learning outcomes and the methodology but adapting the area of interest or concerned regional stakeholders to serve specific and relevant needs. To also provide a generative learning possibility, teaching material might integrate a reflection tool for the learners—in order to evaluate what they have learned and to give feedback for improvement purposes as well.

- To support ownership for successful participation in such learning processes and the implementation of elaborated outcomes, this case study showed that a basic common understanding of sustainability and sustainable regional development by the concerned stakeholders is needed. In addition, the learning objectives should be derived from a common agreement between the stakeholders.

- The implementation of action research methods is important to tackle real-world problems. This fosters a democratic learning process and the participation of all stakeholders. It also enables the integration of different expertise.

6. Conclusions

The following lessons have been concluded through the analysis of the ConSus case study: HEIs have a strong influence on regional innovation and SD. By assuming a role as a driver for sustainable regional development, HEIs are important players in developing regional innovation together with stakeholders from civil society, the economy and the public administration. For this, a shift of their perception from mono-directional providers of research and education (understood as their regular activities) to collaborative processes of knowledge exchange is necessary.

Learning opportunities offered by HEIs are important to provide strategic knowledge exchange and participation possibilities. In this regard, learning activities with the purpose learning about real-world sustainability challenges offer the opportunity to expand on possible solutions for how to tackle these challenges. To meet these requirements, learning activities should be designed as a tool to support collaboration between scientific and regional stakeholders on the same level. Additionally, a joint agreement on learning outcomes and the learning process may foster ownership and encourage the implementation of results. Therefore, it is necessary for HEIs to develop capacities regarding generation and absorption of knowledge as well as collaboration and leadership capacities. The additional establishment of a certain network structure is necessary to embed the strategic tools needed for policy-making and raising awareness raising among the regional actors.

Customizable educational offers serve specific needs for different regional challenges and actors. To react to these demands of different stakeholder groups, regional areas or topics, learning activities might be adaptable in terms of defining learning outcomes or the learning process instead of providing a pre-defined scheme. Beside supporting ownership and implementation of outcomes, it also helps to overcome knowledge barriers.

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