Title: Questioning the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to the Cultural Sustainability of Local Communities

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Questioning the Contribution of Higher Education Institutions to the Cultural Sustainability of Local Communities

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Abstract: Over the last few decades' *sustainability* has become a serious topic of discussion. Within these discussions, culture has emerged as a *fourth pillar of sustainable development* along with the social, economic and environmental dimensions. Thus, sustainability now incorporates four interlinked dimensions: environmental responsibility, economic health, social equity, and cultural vitality. Coinciding with this emergence has been a growing appreciation (and understanding) of education and its potential to assist in the promotion of sustainable development. As a result, it has been suggested that the role played by higher education institutions will be critical to our collective futures. The main purpose of this paper is to highlight the position of culture within any sustainability approach as well as the vital role of higher education institutions in promoting cultural sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainability, sustainable development, cultural sustainability, higher education institutions, case study.

1. Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the concept of sustainability has become a serious topic of discussion. While some of the discussion has focused on how 'sustainable development' practices need to provide a new basis for living and working, it has also challenged the product orientated—or commodification—of such approaches to sustainability. Sustainability, it is argued, is not an end product, but rather, a vision and process (Newman and Kenworthy 1999, p. 5) involving constant creativity and continual change. Moreover, sustainability can only be 'achieved' when there is compatibility between cultural diversity, social justice, environmental responsibility and economic equality. In this regard, Ernst Bloch (1986) stated that sustainability is achievable if we regard it as an essential cultural transformation for the whole of society (also see Packalén 2010 and Nurse 2006). Accordingly, 'culture' has emerged from 'social' sustainability to form a fourth—though largely unexamined—pillar of sustainable development (along with the social, economic and environmental dimensions) (Duxbury and Gillette 2007).

Within this newly constituted fourth pillar, higher education is often cited as being critical to not only establishing the requisite knowledge base (around cultures of sustainability) but also distributing sustainable knowledge, developing skills, and helping people realize their

responsibilities in bringing forward change in behaviors, values and lifestyles (Abd Razak *et al.* 2011). In this regard, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noted that,

> 'Education, in short, is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development' (1997, p. 16).

Higher education institutions, it is argued, are central to creating a cultural awareness of sustainability, which can then be integrated into everyday life (Jain and Pant 2010).

Based on these assertions, this paper is guided by one basic research question: What is the contribution of Higher Education Institutions to the Cultural Sustainability of Local Communities? The main purpose of this research is to highlight the position of culture as a fourth pillar of sustainability, as well as the contribution of higher education institutions to achieving cultural sustainability in their respective communities. The major objectives of this paper—each based on the main aim—are clarified in separate parts. This study is designed to be a case study and involves action research.

The methodology of the study is based on theoretical and survey methods. The study begins with a literature review and attempts to position culture as a key dimension of sustainability. It will then concentrate on the contribution of higher education institutions to achieving cultural sustainability. This section will also involve theoretical work and document analysis from previous studies and research. The second part of the research involves a case study, in which the contribution of the Eastern Mediterranean University toward cultural sustainability in its local community is analyzed through questionnaires, surveys and interviews. Thus, the research will use qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Finally, the paper provides some concluding remarks.

2. Sustainability background

In recent years, the world has witnessed significant change with large numbers of people moving from rural to urban locations, or from one country to another. Much of this migration has been driven by economic growth and the intensification of industrial and commercial regions around the world. These migratory patterns have encountered poor housing conditions, excessive consumption of material and energy resources, instability in social and cultural values, and social separation on a global level. Consequently, these development processes have adversely affected environmental quality, social values and economic equality as well as increased risks of global environmental and human health conditions (Weiland 2006).

Based on these initial discussions, the need to incorporate 'sustainability' approaches into all aspects of human life is seen as being essential to our future. In this regard, the primary reference of sustainability was published in 1972 by the United Nation Conference in Human Environment in Stockholm (Drexhange and Murphy 2010). Then in 1987 a report by the World Commission on the Environment and Development defined sustainability as a problem between environment and development processes (Harris 2003). This report also included a definition for sustainable development,

> 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the

ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987, p. 45).

Moreover, the report was accepted by the *United Nations General Assembly* and it since been deployed as a political approach in countries around world. In 1992, the practice of sustainability—set out at the UNCED in Rio de Janeiro—together with sustainable development were jointly defined as 'improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of [a] supporting eco system' (Zuhairuse *et al*. 2009, p. 273). At this point it was generally accepted, that the demands of sustainability approaches lay in recognizing and merging three dimensions, bing environmental protection, social justice, and economic expansion (for example, see *Figure 1*) (Drexhange and Murphy 2010). In other words, sustainability was branded as economic development based on social justice and the management of natural resources (Alshuwaikhat and Abubakar 2008).
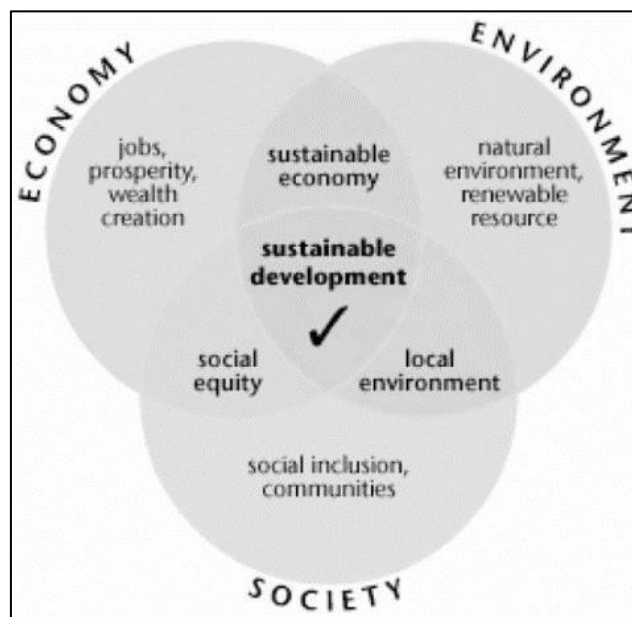

Figure 1: Three interlinked dimensions of Sustainable Development
Source: Carr (2008, p. vi)

While it might be fair to say that the traditional focus of sustainable development was one of limiting environmental degradation, it is equally true to state, that environmental concerns have themselves been the foundation of sustainable development. During the twentieth century however, the concept of sustainable development matured, leading to an increased interconnection between the economic and social elements of development. Accordingly, sustainable development is seen as the interface between environment, economic, and social sustainability.

As important as these developments were, there was also a growing sense that if sustainable development were to have a future then it must develop the capacity to attract people and appeal to their emotions, their behaviors and their values. Harnessing cultural capacity was therefore seen as the key to affecting communal behaviors, values, lifestyle and actions (Duxbury 2001, Nurse 2006, Packalén 2010).

3. Culture as the fourth pillar of sustainability

Sustainable development has generally been defined at the global level but it has only recently begun to emerge at both local and national levels. This change is due to the repositioning of culture within the dimensions of sustainable development, so as to sit alongside environmental, economic and social dimensions. Hildegard Kurt (2004) one of the leading theorists in the sustainability field stated that,

> 'The lack of cultural considerations in sustainability discourse … the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of sustainability have lagged behind the debates on the topic that originated in the natural and social sciences during the mid-1980s' (cited in Duxbury and Gillette 2007, p. 3).

Here then, we note that the sustainable development frameworks, adopted by planners and policy makers in early-to-mid 1990s, lacked much in the way cultural appreciation and understanding. Discussions and debates therefore began to concentrate on establishing cultural consideration in concept of sustainable development grew. In this regard, the emergence of culture in the concept of sustainable development started with UNESCO's Conference on Cultural Policies for Development in Stockholm in 1998. In 2001 UNESCO provided its Global Declaration on Cultural Diversity then, in 2002, at the World Summit Meeting in Johannesburg, the cultural dimensions of sustainable development were once more drawn together. Two years later, the Agenda 21 for Culture (accepted at the Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona) again emphasized the connection in stating that,

> 'Sustainable development and the flourishing of culture are interdependent' (Packalén 2010, p. 119).

Agenda 21 is based on the principle set out in Global Declaration on Cultural Diversity. This declaration has been accepted by over 350 local governments and organizations of cities throughout the world (Dallaire and Colbert 2012, Duxbury and Jeannotte 2010, Packalén 2010).

Traditionally, culture has been under the umbrella of social sustainability or as a component of debate on social capital. In this regard, Matthew Pike (2003) noted,

> 'While there has been much written in recent years about social capital, there has been comparatively little said about cultural capital. Yet the art, the food, the music and the values that lie beneath these are of profound importance in bringing people together' (cited in Duxbury and Gillette 2007, p. 3).

As a result of almost twenty years of sustained pressure, culture appeared to be emerging out of social sustainability to form a separate, though, no less important, fourth dimension for the concept of sustainable development. Despite these advances its status as a separate dimension has not been gone without debate. Furthermore, there has been significant confusion around defining 'culture'. Hence, culture is defined by UNESCO (1995) as,

> 'the whole complex of unique spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs' (cited in Duxbury and Gillette 2007, p. 4).

In this regard, Doubleday (*et al*. 2004) observed,

> 'both dynamic understandings of culture and the recognition that place matters because the practice that is in need of sustaining, as well as those that pose threats, happen in particular communities and in specific geographic contexts' (p. 389).

Taking this one step further, culture, has subsequently come to be understood by those within sustainability in terms of 'cultural capital' or the 'traditions and values, heritage and place, the arts, diversity and social history' (Roseland *et al*. 2005, p. 12). Thus, the tangible and intangible cultural capital is what people received from past generations and what they will pass onto next generations (Duxbury and Gillette 2007). Accordingly, Cultural sustainability can be defined as 'the ability to retain cultural identity, and to allow change to be guided in ways that are consistent with the cultural values of a people' (Sustainable Development Research Institute 1998, p. 1). Incorporating culture into our understanding of sustainability can therefore be seen as a way to affecting our behaviours, values, and consumptive patterns, as well as adapting to a more sustainable-aware lifestyle (Duxbury and Gillette 2007).

Consequently, culture emerged as a separate dimension in the concept of sustainability as a fourth pillar of the concept of sustainable development. Thus, the four-pillar model of sustainability incorporates four interlinked dimensions: environmental responsibility, economic health, social equity and cultural vitality.

3.1 Jon Hawkes's four-pillar model of sustainability

Jon Hawkes is a cultural expert from Australia. In 2001, he published 'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning'. After publishing his book, the attention on cultural sustainability increased. Hawkes' *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability* 'incorporates four interlinked dimensions: environmental responsibility, economic health, social equity, and cultural vitality' (Hawkes 2001 cited in Duxbury *et al*. 2007, p. 2) (for a visual representation see *Figure 2*). Hawkes stated if government wanted public planning and polices to be more effective, a cultural perspective was essential. Hawkes's four-pillar model recognized that culture had a direct effect on quality and vitality of communities as well as social and economic health (Duxbury and Gillette 2007, Duxbury and Jeannotte 2010).

3.2 The medicine wheel approach to sustainability

The Aboriginal medicine wheel (*Figure 3*) is a universal method to thinking, organizing, developing, and healing. This model shows four traditional directions, 'north (environmental), south (social), west (economic), and east (cultural)' (Duxbury and Gillette 2007, p. 14). Surrounding this model is a development planning procedure which is designed to control the development and keep of the framework and its following categories and indicators. The medicine wheel approach is used by Nathan Cardinal and Emilie Adin as a basis to control categories and indicators for discovering and documenting the state of Autochthonous life in and around Vancouver. The planning procedure in this model is cyclical and each step has effects on the next, this feature of the Aboriginal medicine wheel permits the framework to be continually assessed and updated over time (Duxbury and Gillette 2007, Duxbury and Jeannotte 2010).
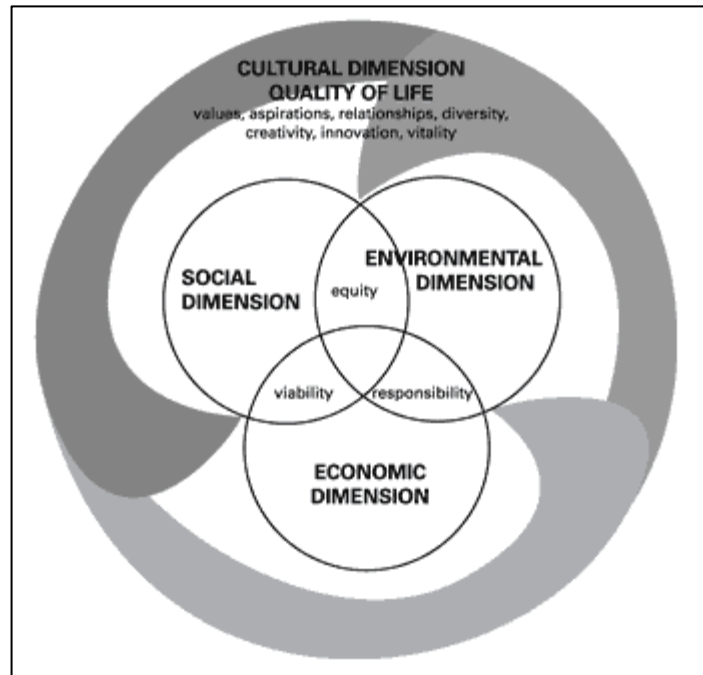
Figure 2: Four-Pillar Model of Sustainability
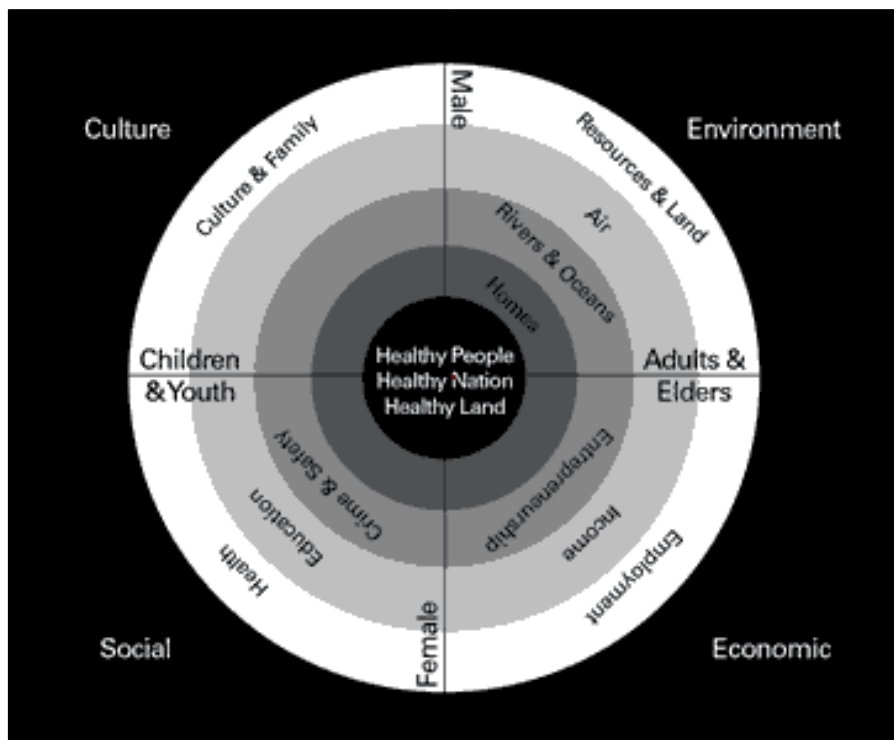Source: Duxbury and Gillette (2007, p. 14)

Figure 3: Medicine Wheel Approach to Sustainability
Source: Duxbury and Jeannotte (2010, p. 12)

4. The contribution of higher education institutions to cultural sustainability of local communities

For centuries, higher education institutions, have drawn together students with dissimilar lifestyles and backgrounds in order to study and live. The fundamental obligation of higher education institutions is to prepare (and foster) students for life by increasing their cognizance, skills, knowledge and values needed to create a better future. Institutions of higher education therefore play an important role in fostering the next generation of decision makers to meet the great challenges of today and the issues of tomorrow (through research activities in various branches). Moreover, higher education institutes possess a unique range of freedoms in being able to focus on the creation of new knowledge while also commenting on the society in which they situated (Cole 2003, Cortese 1999, Weenen 2000). Consequently, educational institutions can be seen as the ideal starting point for promoting the concepts of sustainability (Isiaka and Siong 2008, Shriberg 2002). As UNESCO declared in 1997, 'Education, in short, is humanity's best hope and most effective means in the quest to achieve sustainable development' (cited in Shriberg 2002, p. 84). In this regard, Cortese (1999), a former Dean of Environmental programs at Tufts University, stated,

> 'Society has conveyed a special charter on institutions of higher education. Within the United States, higher education institutions are allowed academic freedom and a tax-free status to receive public and private resources in exchange for their contribution to the health and well-being of society through the creation and dissemination of knowledge and values' (p. 8).

Furthermore, sustainability supporters stress that 'colleges and universities owe it to society to move toward sustainability' (Shriberg 2002, p. 56, Stephens *et al*. 2008). Accordingly, there are numerous perspectives on the role that higher education institutions can play in contributing to the sustainability of their communities. Here, a number of these are presented then explored through the use of a case study (*Section 5*).

Generally speaking, higher education institutions are places whose primary concern is teaching, research and learning; therefore, they can, by promoting and advancing cultural sustainability throughout their teaching and curriculum, have direct effect on their local communities. Besides, as proposed by Cortese (1999) sustainability should be combined within the key role of higher education institutions including teaching, learning and research processes. Accordingly, higher education institutions have potential to facilitate a societal transition by modifying its curriculum to combine, reward, and support skills, integration, and complex systems thinking (Cortese 1999, Stephens *et al*. 2008). Hence, higher education institutions can have direct effect by providing a series of educational programs by focusing on cultural sustainability and designing several workshops to inform students, staff and locals about the necessity and importance of cultural sustainability. Furthermore, there is a fact that higher education institutions can use their environments as a perfect model to educate their students and relative societies by implementing cultural sustainability in their environments. In this regard, Professor David Orr, Chair of Department of Environmental studies at Oberlin College said that higher education institutions are like 'living laboratories'. Establishment of sustainability in these 'living laboratories' creates opportunity for staff to work, students to learn and faculty to teach within a sustainable system that is a perfect model for the world community (Legacy 2004). Within this view, higher education institutions can influence their local communities by promoting cultural sustainability in their environments and promoting their environment has a model for students and their relative communities (Stephens *et al*.

2008). Besides, higher education institutions play a unique role in communities which have the freedom of the creation of new knowledge, free-thinking, idea-exchange research and improving new ideas as well as comment on society to support their communities. Thus, higher education institutions, with their unique social role can establish and maintain a concept of cultural sustainability within their communities (Cole 2003, Cortese 1999, Stephens *et al*. 2008, Weenen 2000). Finally, higher education institutions have the potential to integrate with, as well as influence, the wider society by improving outreach, arrangement, and interactions. In this regard the conceivable mechanisms for improved linkages are diverse, but include, 'engagement in policy-making, non-formal education, community development and planning, and technology assistance' (Stephens *et al*. 2008, p. 322).

5. Case study

Eastern Mediterranean University (EMU) is located in Famagusta city on the east coast of Turkish Republic of North Cyprus (*Figure 4*). Established as the Institute of Higher Technology (ITH) in 1979 the institute sought to produce and foster world-class engineers and technicians. In 1985, ITH broadened its teaching and research base to form the 'Eastern Mediterranean University'. Today, EMU is an international university with eleven faculties and a strong multicultural educational environment. Indeed its student population includes around 14,000 students from 68 countries. Its teaching staff is also comprised of 1,000 instructors from 35 different countries (Strategic Plan of EMU 2012). EMU's campus is situated on 2,200 acres and has strong links with the city's 35,000 residents (Strategic Plan of EMU 2012).
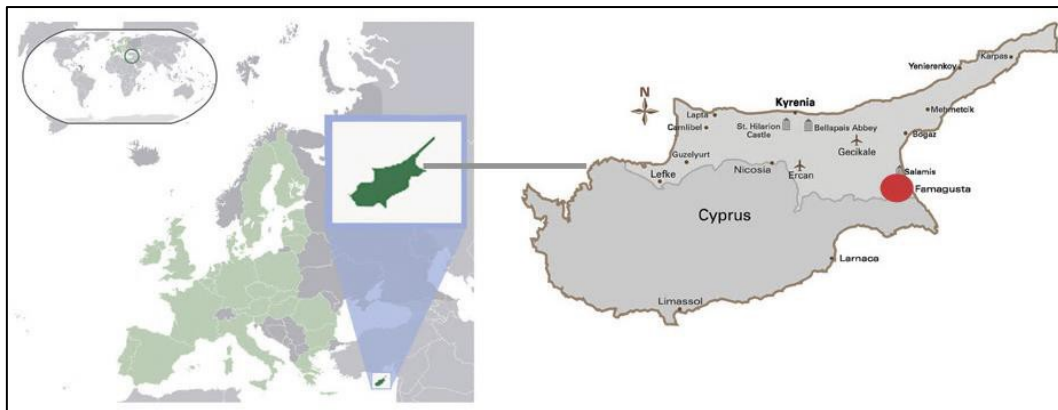

Figure 4: Location of EMU
Source: http://www.Google.com

According to the above noted statement, approximately 50 per cent of the Famagusta city is linked in someway to EMU. In the other words, EMU, through its programs, campus environment, events and activities, connects with half of the city's population. It can therefore be seen as possessing significant promotional potential in terms of cultural sustainability.

In this regard, the Center for Social and Cultural Activities offer a number of annual activities which are designed to meet and support social and cultural needs of students and local people. These activities include a 'communication bridge' between local people and students.

Existing activities create a good situation for students to become familiar with the various social and cultural characteristics that each brings with them, including those found locally and internationally. As a result, local people have an opportunity to understand the strengths of their own social and cultural capitals. Several of these activities are offered in conjunction with Orientation Day, Spring Festival, Sand Sculpture Festival and Competition and various concerts. Moreover, they are based around traditional music and dance, arts, crafts, historical places, and other lifestyle factors such as food and fashion. Each faculty holds its own activities, with the Faculty of Architecture hosting several activities including a celebration of World Heritage Day. Here the faculty organizes several workshops to help raise awareness and create sensitivities amongst students and citizens towards the historical heritage and sites. Various seminars and conferences focusing on aspects of cultural sustainability are also offered.

As a result of its programming, curriculum and public activities, EMU is effectively contributing to cultural sustainability in its community.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, models of sustainability now incorporate four interlinked dimensions being: environmental responsibility, economic health, social equity, and cultural vitality. Paying attention and promoting cultural sustainability is essential based on the increasing demand for cultural sustainability in communities. In this regard, institutions of higher education based on the their multiple roles in communities include research, teaching, providing new knowledge, skills and technologies as well as prepare their graduates as effective and responsible citizens, are one of the main social communities which have a crucial role in promoting and conserving cultural sustainability throughout their local communities.

In this regard, the following recommendations are proposed to help increase the role and contribution of higher education institutes in the area of cultural sustainability:

- Improving the management and planning system which has direct effects on the contribution of cultural sustainability.
- Creating a special committee (CSC) to have control and take decision for promoting activities and strategies toward cultural sustainability.
- Providing a set of comprehensive strategies based on polices of proposed committee (CSC).
- Increasing the level of collaboration among proposed committee members (CSC) and local organizations such as Municipality, Cultural Centre and other research centers, so as to, develop strategies for the effective utilization of social and cultural capital.
- Improve the partnership between local people and the proposed committee (CSC) in order to provide effective decision functions based on local needs and demands.
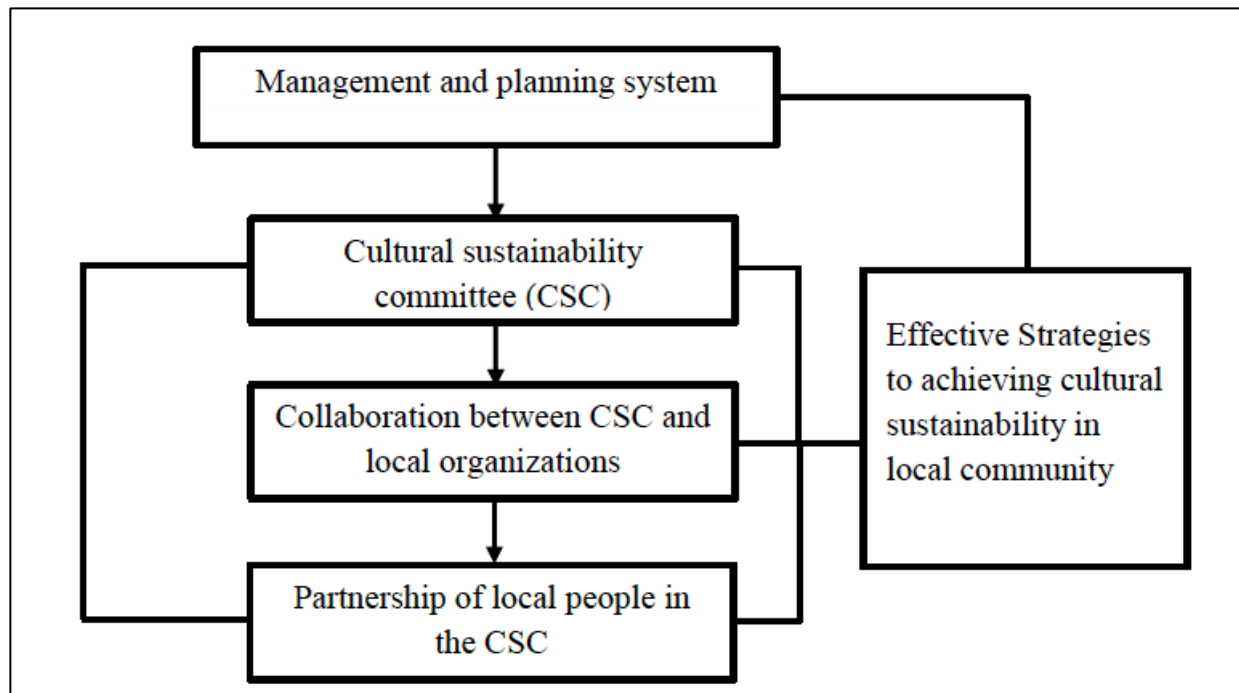
Figure 5: Recommendation approach for increasing the role and contribution of higher education institutes on cultural sustainability of their local community

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