

ARE UNIVERSITIES UNDERMINING THEIR SUSTAINABILITY COMMITMENTS IN INTRODUCTORY ECONOMICS COURSES? A CANADIAN CASE STUDY.

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Like many North American universities, the three largest public universities in British Columbia, Canada, have signed onto the Talloires Declaration of 1990, committing them to promoting students' environmental literacy and ecological citizenship. As a result, there is pressure to integrate sustainability across the curriculum. This study explores how such commitments have played out in the introductory economics (hereafter 'Econ101') curriculum in these three universities.

In North America, about 40% of undergraduate students take an Econ101 course, while relatively few of these students take more advanced courses in economics. Econ101 thus serves as a primary venue for many students to learn economic theory and the economics profession's approach to evaluating public policy. Therefore, Econ101 is a course that has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the knowledge and tools that students can mobilize to contribute to sustainability. Although standard economic theory offers insights on policy options to address environmental challenges, such as mechanisms to put a price on carbon, this body of theory has been critiqued for failing to incorporate environment-economy linkages, to take into account ecological limits and for a unidimensional conceptualization of the determinants of human wellbeing.

To examine how sustainability commitments are played out in the Econ101 classroom, this study relied on content analysis of 12 leading Econ101 textbooks and 74 interviews from three distinct groups at the three universities. The first group was made up of 54 students who had recently completed an Econ101 course. The second involved 11 economists who teach Econ101. The third involved 9 professors who have expertise in economics who teach undergraduates in programs that have an explicit focus on sustainability (e.g., Environmental Science), where the program requires that their students take Econ101. The resulting dataset was analyzed from an ecological economics perspective, drawing on concepts such as scale, ecological limits, societal metabolism and a broader conception of the human actor. The study shows the universities' sustainability commitments have yet to influence Econ101 curriculum. The courses are doing little to prepare students to understand and address sustainability and in some respects may have the perverse effect of preparing students to undermine sustainability. Recommendations are offered for developing an introductory economics curriculum that attends to ecological limits, that incorporates a more sophisticated conceptualization of environment-economy linkages and the determinants of human wellbeing, and that makes explicit and interrogates the values implicit economic theory and analysis. However, existing economics departments are found to be unreceptive environments for such a course.