Sustainability Reporting in Academia: Today & Tomorrow

Sridhar Pabbisetty (COO, Indian Institute of Management Bangalore)
Saurabh Saraf (Director, Reap Benefit)
Kuldeep Dantewadia (Director, Reap Benefit)
Mitalee Gupta (Executive, CII-ITC Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Development)

Abstract

History has taught us that academic institutions lay the foundation of a nation's future, as they rear talent and nurture leaders of tomorrow. As core elements of a society they play several roles that include not only imparting education but also promoting innovations, leading development, generating employment and influencing the future. This paper has been designed to facilitate development of a comprehensive and practical framework to promote universities in India to acknowledge the need of long-term sustainability by proactively reporting their sustainability initiatives.

With socio-environmental attributes becoming increasingly important for stakeholders, universities in the United States have realized their role as promoters of sustainability and taken appropriate steps in order to communicate their performance. This research presents an intensive study of the self reported sustainability data by 32 Universities listed on The College Sustainability Report Card, across 2008-11; mapped against 16 indicators. The role played by various voluntary initiatives in this regard as well some of the government interventions has also been analysed. Furthermore, an approach has been proposed for the Indian counterparts, which shall turn out to be favorable if campuses begin implementing sustainability, by taking lessons from Universities abroad that have perceived the importance of sustainability reporting.

1. Introduction

Standing at the junction of changing environment and experiencing a fading ecological timeline thus a need to indebt- an increase in awareness on issues like climate change and resource depletion; nations are trying to invest in alternative solutions so as to secure a sustainable future for themselves as well as the globe. As an aftermath of economic recession, the concept of sustainability is being seen as a tool for potential risk abatement, long term profit generation and CSR[1] driver.

Triggered by the rapid advancement and globalization, the traditional academic cultures have begun to collaborate for the larger interest of the society. Academic institutions now play a role of Knowledge Enterprises that breed thought leaders. Therefore as vital parts of the knowledge system, academic institutions are very uniquely positioned to catalyze positive changes in the society by taking sustainable measures and reporting them for increased transparency.

A sustainable Academic Institution/University functions as community embodying sustainability principles itself. It reflects these principles in its curriculum and research, prepare students to contribute towards an environmentally healthy, economically robust and socially strong society.

In its 57th meeting in December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, 2005- 2014, (DESD)[2] 'emphasizing that education is an indispensable element for achieving sustainable development'. It acknowledges the need to:

a) Integrate sustainable science and education

b) Strengthen co-ordination and collaboration between different levels of education for Sustainable Development

c) Mitigate information and knowledge gaps between different parts of the world

# 2. Sustainability in Universities: Trends, Risks & Opportunities

Realizing the importance of sustainable development many universities and college campuses in United States have demonstrated ways in which an academic institution can lead the way to a sustainable future. From offering courses and specializations on Sustainability related themes and topics, to campus programs for carbon neutrality and water conservation, the academic milieu in the West are taking sustainability to heart. They also maintain a high degree of transparency, which is evident through the presence of several voluntary programs and public forums like The College Sustainability Report Card Program, Sustainability Tracking Rating & Assessment Systems (STARS), Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE), etc.

---

[1] Corporate Social Responsibility
[2] http://www.desd.org

The College Sustainability Report Card Program[3] (www.greenreportcard.org) is a comparative interpretation of colleges against a set of sustainability indicators- Administration, green building, water & waste management, transportation and endowment etc. The report card marks colleges on basis of grades/GPA for these indicators. Methodology for the report card includes 5 steps i.e. selection, survey composition, data collection and verification, assessment and recognition.

The following graphs indicate how green report card has evolved in terms of number of schools and indicators over last 4 successive years.

Number of Universities/Colleges

Number of Survey Indicators
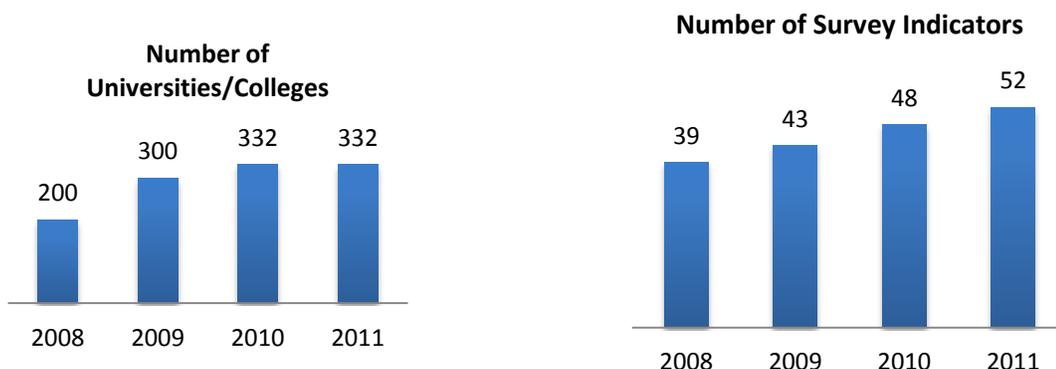
2.1. Research Sample and Selection Rationale

Our Sample size of this research includes 32 universities of USA and Canada which have been chosen on the basis of accolades - overall, campus and endowment sustainability leaders in 2008 that is decided by Green Report Card. Throughout the sample changes amongst various indicators have been mercurial rather than perpetual. The following table enlists the Universities that constituted the sample.

---

[3] Green Report Card

S.No.	Universities/Colleges		
1.	Arizona State University	17.	Pennsylvania State University
2.	Bates College	18.	Santa Clara University
3.	Bowdoin College	19.	Seattle University
4.	Carleton College	20.	University of British Columbia
5.	Carnegie Mellon University	21.	University of Calgary
6.	College of Atlantic	22.	University of California
7.	Dartmouth College	23.	University of Colorado
8.	Dickinson College	24.	University of Florida
9.	Duke University	25.	University of Michigan
10.	Grand Valley State University	26.	University of New Hampshire
11.	Harvard University	27.	University of North Carolina
12.	Middlebury College	28.	University of Oregon
13.	MIT	29.	University of Vermont
14.	Northeastern University	30.	University of Washington
15.	Oberlin College	31.	Williams College
16.	Oregon State University	32..	Yale University

2.2   Performance Appraisal and Past Trends

For the purpose of analysis, reported content by the sample Universities was mapped against broad indicators. The findings from the analysis are detailed in further sections with details against these indicators.

- **Governance & Administration**

The following table enlists the sub indicators with their definitions. It also contains graphs exhibiting the variation in the number of universities reporting against an indicator over the years. There is a gradual rise in the number of Universities reporting about funding mechanisms for sustainability projects (22% in 2009-10) while a steep rise in the institutions reporting about their websites for sustainability initiatives (from 3-32 in 2009-10).

		2008	2009	2010	2011
Sustainability Policy	A formal action plan or endorsement for commitment to campus sustainability	27	30	32	32
Sustainability Related Committees	Engaging multiple stakeholders into a committee working on issues of campus sustainability.	28	30	32	32
Website detailing Sustainability Initiatives	A Website to facilitate involvement in campus sustainability initiatives and awareness	2	3	31	31
Green purchasing Initiative	Mandating through a formal policy, or informally prioritizing, the purchase of reusable or green-certified materials	28	30	32	32

Mechanisms to fund Sustainability Projects	Mechanisms to invest in sustainability projects viz. Renewable Energy, Resource Efficiency, Community Development etc	14 23 28 31

- **Student Involvement**

The table enlists sub-indicators in the Student Involvement category with graphs showing the number of Universities that reported on them over the years 2008-11. As evident from the graphs, Sustainability internships and student run organizations seem to have been emphasized in the form of increased stakeholder engagement.

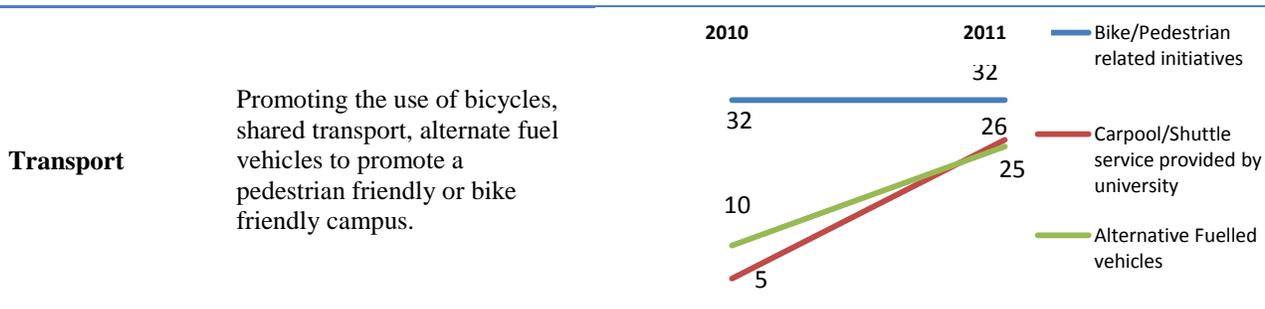|		2008	2009	2010	2011
Sustainability themed residential communities	Offering sustainability-themed residential housing options.	0	1	20	23
Sustainability related Jobs/Internships	Offering sustainability internship or job opportunities for students on campus	4	17	31	31
Organizations (For Sustainability) run by or involving students	Having active student organizations that prioritize campus sustainability efforts	21	30	32	32

- **Green Buildings**

78.5% of the Universities who were reporting their LEED certified buildings data in 2010 increased the number of LEED certified buildings on their campus in 2011.

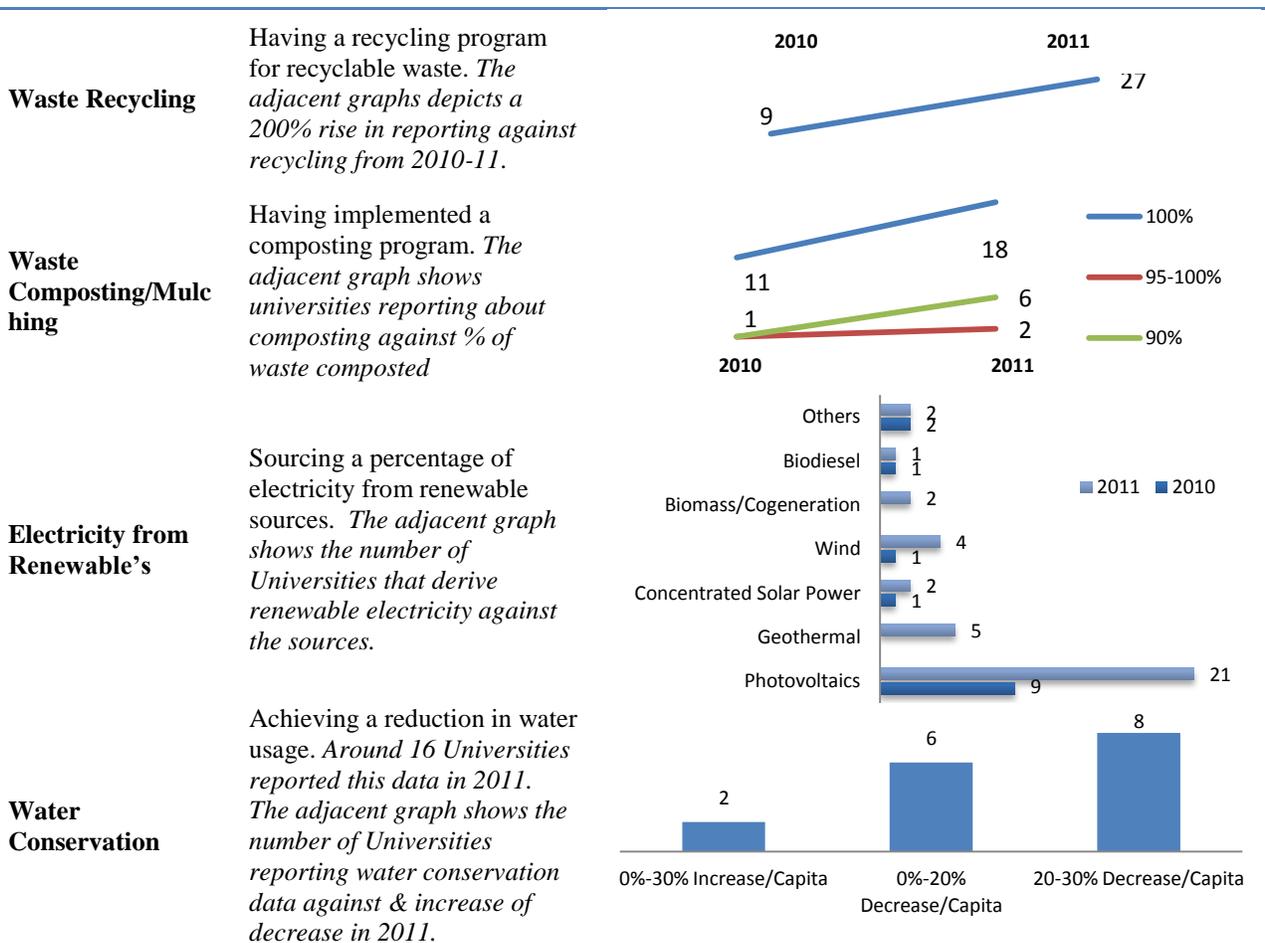| **LEED Certified Buildings**	Constructing buildings that are certified by, or meet the standards of, green building rating systems LEED[4]. *The adjacent graph depicts a 79% rise in the number of Universities reporting about their green buildings from 2010-11.*	14 (2010) 25 (2011)

- **Transport**

---

[4] U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design

There is a rise of 160% in the number of Universities reporting about alternatively fuelled vehicles while a 400% rise in carpool services in 2010-11.

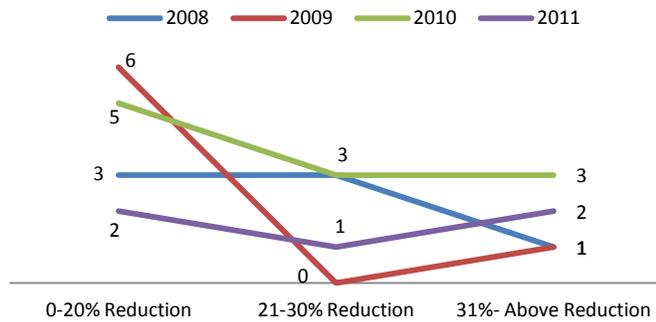|		
Transport	Promoting the use of bicycles, shared transport, alternate fuel vehicles to promote a pedestrian friendly or bike friendly campus.	

- **Resource Conservation**

Around 26 Universities have also reported on their energy efficiency projects in 2011 and 21 Universities reported data on Waste reduction in the same year.

Waste Recycling	Having a recycling program for recyclable waste. *The adjacent graphs depicts a 200% rise in reporting against recycling from 2010-11.*	
Waste Composting/Mulching	Having implemented a composting program. *The adjacent graph shows universities reporting about composting against % of waste composted*	
Electricity from Renewable's	Sourcing a percentage of electricity from renewable sources. *The adjacent graph shows the number of Universities that derive renewable electricity against the sources.*	
Water Conservation	Achieving a reduction in water usage. *Around 16 Universities reported this data in 2011. The adjacent graph shows the number of Universities reporting water conservation data against & increase of decrease in 2011.*	

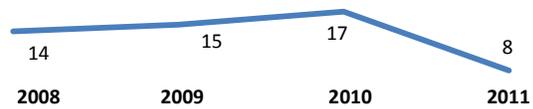- **GHG Emission Reduction**

GHG Reduction	Having a commitment to reduce GHG Emissions. *The adjacent graph shows the number of Universities that reported reduction in their GHG emissions against the % reduction.*	
GHG Inventory	Maintaining a GHG Inventory. *The adjacent graph details the number of Universities reporting their GHG inventory.*	

2.3 Challenges & Threats faced by Universities

This section details possible challenges that a University may face in initiating sustainability reporting, taking lessons from our sample Universities. An understanding of various constraints is critical to attaining a successful planning and implementation process, even for other nations.

Threat	Description
Lack of Awareness & Willingness	Lack of awareness is usually the first issue that crops up when a college/university endeavors to build a sustainable campus. The most critical of all, it is required to create and generate an understanding on why and how about sustainable development and its relevance to the university as well each one of its member. At times, little to no support from the university staff might make it difficult to execute new initiatives.
Resource Constraint	Different universities have set different prioritizes in regards to their vision and mission. Owing to lack of aligning sustainability with the university's core policy, there is always some resource constraint that campuses face while taking up sustainability for the first time. Institutions don't always have ready availability of infrastructure to implement new programs and initiatives.
Initial Cost Investment	Some technological modifications, generating awareness, changing existing policies, etc. might involve high initial cost of investment. However, university should not focus on short term, but target long-term benefits from these investments. In most cases there

|	
	is a high degree of difficulty in economically justifying the need and implementation of new initiatives or programs.[5]
Deviation from the Original motive of achieving Sustainable Development	Owing to lack of training and awareness amongst all members of the university, many people know a little about different aspects of sustainability and often fail to visualize its long term benefits. Sustainability directors increasingly find themselves filling out several surveys and green rankings, from organizations, each with its own twist on questions about energy use, mass transit, water conservation, and so on.
Inefficient Stakeholder Engagements	One of the most commonly faced problems by colleges and universities is the lack of understanding by its members that effort of each individual counts towards the journey of sustainability. The common notion that in a conservation program what one person can do is very meager and therefore the effort is not worth the trouble. Schools have been performing very low in Stakeholder Engagement and Endowment Transparency categories, since the beginning.[6]
Data Collection	Many universities and colleges also feel that the data collection is becoming a real burden, owing to which the real motive of this complete sustainability reporting and stakeholder management is getting overshadowed.

2.4   Opportunities and Benefits

Establishing goals and targets, benchmarking progress and demonstrating transparency are standards for moving towards the direction of achieving sustainability. Public reporting in this regard is an essential driver for long-term success, and offer several opportunities and benefits.
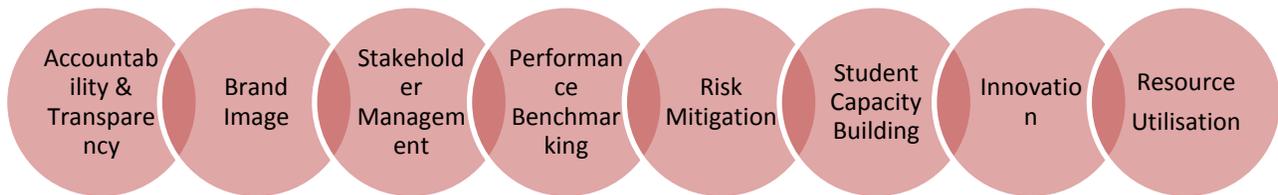
Public reporting provides a way for education institutions to hold themselves accountable to their stakeholders and also provides them a means of meeting their concerns and expectations. It is an effective way of tracking performance and communicating progress and results to the members of the campus community and beyond, such to prospective

---

[5] http://campusclimatesolutions.org/campus-sustainability-officers-challenges/
[6] http://www.greenreportcard.org/report-card-2011/executive-summary/key-findings

students, NGOs, Private sector firms, etc. As good example that reinforces this fact is: In the 2011 Princeton Review survey 65% of college applicants said that an institution's commitment to environmental issues would impact their decision on where to attend.[7] Via reporting a university/ college can easily ensure that commitments are met, necessary action plans are implemented to achieve the targeted goals.

Having a public deadline for reporting is a powerful driver for ensuring that this important work does not get pushed down the list of priorities. Goals without deadlines are of no use. Reporting also provides platform for identification of potential risks and implementation of appropriate risk management models.

But most importantly, reporting provides a variety of excellent experiential education opportunities, as it exposes students and other individuals of the institution to processes and systems that will be in growing demand in future. Students can gain marketable technical skills related to carbon accounting, reporting, renewable energy systems, green building, and more. There are also a whole host of relevant disciplines where students can earn valuable experience, such as economics and financing, law and policy, and strategic planning and management.[8]

3. Policy Interventions in United States driving Sustainability in Academia

- **American College &University President's Climate Commitment (ACUPCC)** - ACUPCC is a league of 650 signatories wherein they have pledged to reduce, and eventually eliminate/neutralize greenhouse gas emissions in their operations and provide the education, research and community engagement to enable the rest of the society to do the same. During our research ACUPCC was the chief source of ascertaining how GHG emission and reductions have altered over 4 successive years. As of January 2011, 676 institutes have been affiliated to ACUPCC.[9]

- **Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE)** - AASHE empowers higher education institutes to lead the sustainability transformation by delivering resources, concentrated professional development and grid of support to extend sustainability in all spheres. AASHE is one out of three supporters of ACUPCC. It's Sustainability Tracking; Assessment & Rating System is immense initiative to develop a standardisation instrument for higher education instrument. While conducting our research AASHE along with 3 other federations helped in conducting research to make green report card survey's possible. Recent study shows 859 members forms a part of AASHE.[10]

---

[7] Princeton Review, 2011
[8] http://campusclimatesolutions.org/student-engagement-in-climate-action-planning/
[9] http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/node/6572

[10] http://www.greenreportcard.org/get-involved/resources

- **Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (STARS)** – This is a transparent, self-reporting framework for colleges and universities to gauge relative progress toward sustainability. Over 300 institutions are participating in STARS and over 150 have earned some or the other rating. STARS essentially works towards creating incentives for continual improvement toward sustainability by facilitate information disclosure about sustainability practices and performances by higher education institutions.[11]

4. Sustainability Culture in Indian Campuses

At present the scenario in India is not very pleasant in regards to sustainability and reporting. Academic institutions must realize that owing to their unique positioning they not only influence the relationship between humans and their environment but also nurture and breed thought leaders who form the backbone of the economy.

Though, as a result of the growing consciousness and awareness on issues of climate change, environmental degradation and resource depletion, reporting sustainability performance is emerging as an opportunity for driving innovations and securing long-term viability. But still being at a budding stage there are a number of reasons/causes, as mentioned in the table below, which contribute to this non/lower-level performance of universities/colleges on sustainability parameters.
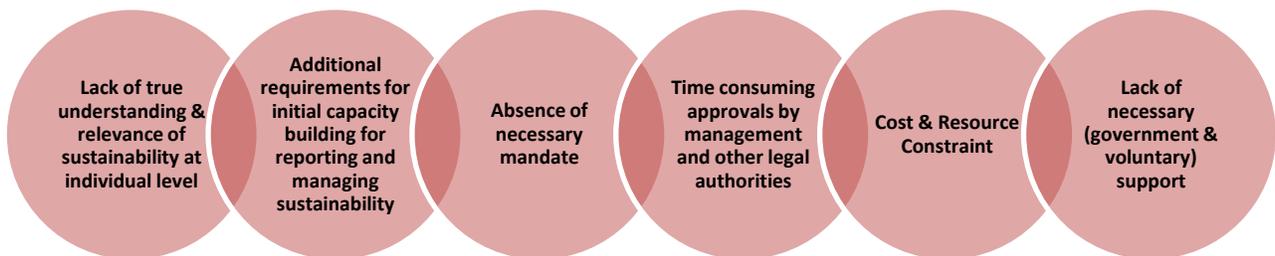
One of the significant factors that has not only dampened the interest of corporations in sustainability reporting but also caused a delay in its further significant uptake, is the lack of awareness as well as necessary support in the form of voluntary/government initiatives that could have promoted sustainability in campuses. Such a support and guidance is what basically colleges/universities need here in India in order embrace and work towards sustainable development.

Some of the presently active initiatives, that are working towards promoting sustainability and reporting in Indian Educational entities are:

---

[11] https://stars.aashe.org/

- **SIFE** – an international not for profit organization, that works to mobilize, university students to make a difference to their communities. At present 48 colleges/universities in India have subscribed to this initiative.[12]
- **Reap Benefit** – An initiative that highlights environmental initiatives by educational institutions and make green actions a habit among students. Almost 50 institutions have been profiled on their website (Both schools and colleges)[13]

5. The Way Forward for India

The best approach for an educational institution; in a country like India would be to develop a successful sustainability strategy would be to engage its stakeholders in its initiatives. For e.g. students, staff, network organizations, faculty, local communities etc. The following model demonstrates how academic institutions can take a lead in promoting sustainable development (SD) by undertaking various measures.

---
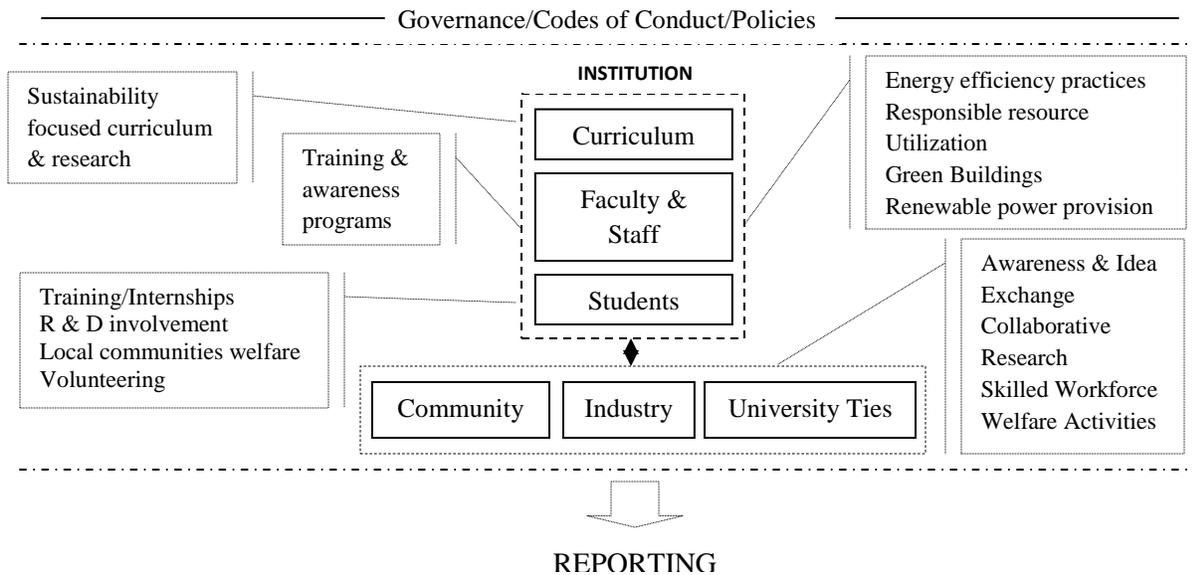
[12] http://www.sife.org
[13] www.reapbenefit.org

This proposed approach, which the universities/colleges in India can readily adopt, has essentially been drawn based on the lessons learned and best practices adopted by the universities in the West. The overall process of building a sustainable campus is complex; however it can be implemented in the following mentioned phased manner:

- **STEP 1** - The first step towards incorporating sustainability is to begin with establishing a sustainability policy/program initiative, create awareness regarding the same and ensure that sustainable development concepts form a part of the core curriculum across various disciplines.
- **STEP 2** – As the awareness and willingness towards sustainability grows further, universities and can thereafter begin implementing campus greening initiatives and also encourage research on sustainable development issues, to improve scientific understanding through exchanges ideas. Establishing objectives and targets for the subsequent years is also a necessity.
- **STEP 3** – Once the university/college begins to truly support sustainability efforts in the communities in which they reside, they may then partner with local authorities and civil society to foster more viable, resource-efficient communities that are socially inclusive and have small environmental footprints.

To start with those Universities who have already implemented these steps may report about their achievements and progress for the knowledge of other peers. We hope that educational institutions in India begin to realize their role as promoters of sustainable development and start demonstrating transparency to their stakeholders by disclosing their performance. If universities and colleges have an explicit understanding of how to achieve sustainability, they would directly contribute towards development of a society that values people, the planet and profits and respects the finite resource boundaries of the earth.

Bibliography

(2012). *Guide to 322 Green Colleges,* U.S.A.: Princeton Review, U.S. Green Building Council.

College Rankings by Princeton Review (http://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings.com)

The College Sustainability Report Card (http://www.greenreportcard.org/)

Sustainability Endowments Institute (http://www.endowmentinstitute.org/)

U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (http://www.usgbc.org)

Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (http://www.desd.org)

Campus Climate Solutions (http://campusclimatesolutions.org)

American College & University President's Climate Commitment (http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org)

Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (http://www.aashe.org/)

Sustainability Tracking, Assessment & Rating System (https://stars.aashe.org/)

SIFE India (http://www.sifeindia.org)

Reap Benefit (www.reapbenefit.org)