



## The “Sustainable development referential” as an innovative tool to pilot and implement sustainability development strategies in French Higher Education Institutions.

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### Abstract.

The implementation of “Sustainability management systems”, has been viewed as a facilitator (lever) when it comes to developing and integrating sustainability and social responsibility in companies. An increasing number of higher education institutions adopt such systems to support the elaboration and implementation of sustainability strategies in their activities and operations. However, to our knowledge, few researches (if any), have addressed this topic in the context of Higher Education Institutions in France. This paper presents and discusses why and how an innovative tool “the sustainability development referential” has been developed to support these institutions (“Grandes Écoles” and Universities) in their efforts to implement social responsibility (SR) and sustainable development (SD). More specifically, it traces back the origins and stages (from 2002 to 2012) leading to the establishment of this framework. To conduct this research we applied the methodology of case study analysis. The paper shows that this referential is an innovative tool aiming at helping higher education institutions to (1) Make a diagnosis of their situation regarding SD and SR ; (2) Define SD and SR strategies in line with national policies. (3) Implement an action plan (short term) and structure (mid and long term) their approach of SR and DD. (4) Assess actions; progress and outcomes in SD and SR. (5) Evaluate the possibility to benefit from “labels” and certifications in SD and/or SR. This paper situates at the interface between two principal fields of literature on: (1) Sustainability Management Systems (adapted to address the specificities of higher Education institutions) and (2) the design process (to identify stages in the development of this innovative tool.) .Emphasis is put on three interdependent questions and dimensions: - the reasons why the innovative framework has been developed – its content (evolutions) - and the underlying processes (how it evolved). This case study shows that the design process follows a trajectory based on the interplay between “internal” and “external” dimensions. “Internal dimensions” cover (1) The number and variety of stakeholders involved in the process (2) The interactions between these actors. The process suggests a progressive transformation of “intermediate” and “boundary” objects which are co- constructed by actors involved . “External” drivers, such as national policies and laws, triggered new stages in the design of the referential; putting pressure on actors to modify its content.

**Key words:** sustainable development, responsible innovations, management systems, higher education institutions

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