

Sustainable Transformation of China's Higher Education: Theoretical Reconstruction and Implementation Pathways from the Perspective of Ecopedagogy

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Against the backdrop of intensifying global ecological crises, China has proposed the concept of ecological civilization and elevated it to a national development strategy (Peters et al., 2025). As an integral part of social systems, higher education is increasingly expected to support and promote the development of ecological civilization (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2025). However, contextually grounded theoretical frameworks and practical pathways for the sustainable transformation of higher education remain underexplored (Zhu & Zhao, 2025).

This study aims to explore the current status of sustainable transformation in Chinese higher education, develop an ecopedagogy-informed theoretical framework tailored to the Chinese context, and propose pathways for its implementation.

The study adopts a qualitative research design. First, it conducts a critical literature review to clarify key concepts and identify research gaps. Building on this theoretical foundation, the study collects empirical data from two to three purposively selected Chinese universities. Data collection involves institutional document analysis and expert interviews. It then applies constructivist grounded theory to develop a theoretical framework and propose implementation pathways that address the research questions.

Given that this study is still in its early stages, in this presentation, I will primarily provide a theoretical and conceptual analysis. I will focus on two sub-questions: (1) Why is sustainable transformation in Chinese higher education necessary? And (2) What role does higher education play in advancing ecological civilization? First, I will clarify three key concepts: sustainable transformation, ecopedagogy, and ecological civilization. Next, I will systematically review the background and evolution of ecological civilization in China and elaborate on the roles of higher education in advancing ecological civilization. Finally, I will examine how ecopedagogy could guide institutional reforms to facilitate the sustainable transformation of higher education.

This study will contribute to sustainable higher education and provide practical recommendations for universities to advance sustainability-oriented initiatives.

Keywords

Sustainable transformation, China's higher education, Theoretical reconstruction, Implementation pathways, Ecopedagogy

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