

Viewpoint

# Sustainable development goals for higher education institutions: What happened in the past years?

Eszter Szendrei-Pál \* 

\* Doctoral School of Entrepreneurship and Business, Budapest Business School, Budapest, Hungary. Correspondence: [szendrei-pal.eszter@uni-bge.hu](mailto:szendrei-pal.eszter@uni-bge.hu)

**Abstract:** The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the importance of quality education in Goal 4 (United Nations, 2015). In 2020 a study was conducted about the projects and actions of Budapest Business School (BBS) related to SDGs – Goal 4. As a result, a SWOT matrix of BBS's sustainability strategy was created. During the current research, I plan to review each element of the matrix and investigate BBS's development from a sustainability point of view. Additionally, I also involved students in the research, and asked their opinion about BBS's actions and studied their understanding of sustainability a questionnaire. The goal of this research is to follow-up the past years' actions of BBS and create a status report of the university's progress in sustainability projects. The updated SWOT matrix can be useful by BBS's management, and the results of the student questionnaire can be considered for the purpose of planning future actions. Furthermore, the follow-up methodology can be useful for other universities and could also serve as a basis to investigate their own status in their sustainability projects.

**Keywords:** sustainability; sustainable development; higher education; SWOT matrix

## 1. Introduction

Sustainability has become more and more important in the field of education in the past few years. As one of the goals of AGENDA 2030 is related to it, several higher education institutions from all around the world started to improve their processes in a sustainable way. Budapest Business School (henceforth BBS) has already started this activity a few years ago with the creation of a sustainability strategy (Budapest Business School [BBS], n.d.-a). In 2020, I reviewed the status of BBS in the implementation process (Szendrei-Pál, 2021), and I decided to conduct the same research to see what happened in the past few years at the university.

The goal of this paper is to collect and shortly introduce regulations relating to higher education institutions' role in the field of sustainability. Additionally, I would like to present a process which can be applied in higher education institutions to check their progress in the field of sustainability. To present the process itself, I performed the assessment on the sustainability strategy of BBS. I believe this paper can draw the attention of other universities to the importance of sustainability.

First, the paper will give a short summary of the most important regulations and organizations related to sustainability goals and actions. After that, a brief introduction of the results of the 2020 research will follow, and the elements of the 2020 SWOT matrix will be introduced. I will also introduce the details of the new data collection process and its results. Finally, the new SWOT matrix of BBS's sustainability strategy will be created based on the results of interviews and questionnaires, and the main differences between the old and new strategies will also be introduced.

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## 2. Overview of the most important regulations and organizations related to sustainability goals and actions of higher education institutions

In this section, the most important sustainability-related documents and organizations from the perspective of higher education institutions will be introduced. The goal of this section is to contextualise to my research so that readers can better understand the motivation behind the actions and motivation of BBS.

### *Regulations*

The first document highlighting education's importance with respect to sustainability is the Final Report of Tbilisi Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education from 1978. This report raised attention to the connection between education and achieving sustainability goals (UNESCO, 1978).

After that, the AGENDA 21 action plan was created in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. This document was not limited to higher education but also involved another relevant approach, namely collaboration between countries, as sustainability goals could not be achieved alone (United Nations, 1992).

The next regulation is the UNECE Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development from 2005. It highlights that education is a human right and a must-have for achieving sustainable aims. The strategy aimed to raise attention to the problem of sustainability via the integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) goals. It targeted the knowledge and skill development of people (United Nations, 2005).

The latest document is the AGENDA 2030, which contains 17 Sustainable Development Goals (henceforth SDGs) (UNESCO et al., 2015). The 17 SDGs include targets not only for the field of education, but several other areas (e.g., gender equality, poverty, etc.). Goal 4.7 focuses on the role of education and highlights the importance of lifelong learning. According to this document, the role of education is to provide skills and knowledge for students so that they are able to think sustainably and live a sustainable lifestyle. Each higher education institution must achieve these targets by 2030 (UNESCO et al., 2015).

### *Organizations*

As the United Nations (1992) mentioned it, sustainability goals cannot be achieved alone. This means that collaborations between countries are a must to be successful in the implementation of sustainable targets. In the following, I will shortly introduce two international associations which aims to help universities in the process of becoming sustainable universities.

In 1950, with the contribution of UNESCO, the International Associations of Universities (henceforth IAU) was founded (International Associations of Universities [IAU], n.d.-a). More than 130 countries are members of the IAU. Its mission is to help higher education institutions (HEIs) in the application process of sustainability related policies and practices in their activities.

Here I have to mention an initiative called 'Principles for Responsible Management Education (henceforth PRME)' supported by the United Nations (Principles for Responsible Management Education [PRME], n.d.-a). The initiative was founded in 2007 and has about 800 members worldwide (PRME, n.d.-a). In 2016 a new chapter of PRME was introduced called PRME Chapter Central and Eastern Europe (henceforth PRME chapter CEE) (PRME, n.d.-b). It focuses on the members' progress in the Central and Eastern European regions, and they meet regularly (usually once in a year).

These are the most essential regulations which a higher education institution must consider if it would like to start improving its processes and wishes to operate in a sustainable way, and these are the organizations which could help it achieve such goals.

### 3. Sustainability at BBS

Budapest Business School considers the sustainable development of the university essential. Each sustainability-related action fosters improvement from different aspects. In this part, I will introduce BBS's sustainability strategy, BBS's University Sustainability Centre, and its successor institution called the Centre of Excellence for Sustainability Impacts in Business and Society (CESIBUS).

#### *Sustainability strategy*

The Sustainability strategy of BBS was created in 2017. It aimed to achieve development in the areas of sustainable community building and more sustainable operation. In line with the SDG goals, BBS claims that developing students' knowledge and understanding of the topic help them to become more responsible citizens, employees, and future leaders. BBS would like to contribute to a better future in this way (BBS, n.d.-a).

There are 4 focus areas of the strategy. The first is responsible education and responsible research. The goal of this part is to integrate the topic into the curriculum and research programmes so that the students will be able to apply sustainability principles in practice. The second area is the development of the in-house community. As part of this goal, BBS requires the active participation of students, instructors, managers and associates working in functional and servicing organizational units. As a result, the university expects to have a cooperative, supportive and creative atmosphere at the institution. The third part of the strategy focuses on the relations with external stakeholders. With the help of it, knowledge and experience sharing is possible at both national and international levels with e.g. other universities, and organizations based on the principle of sustainability. Finally, the fourth part of the strategy concerns responsibility for the natural environment, in which BBS focuses on the decrease of the negative effects of its daily activities on the environment (BBS, 2017).

#### *Three units for sustainability*

In BBS's sustainability strategy, three new units were founded: the University Sustainability Council, the University Sustainability Network, and the University Sustainability Centre (henceforth USC). The University Sustainability Council monitors the achievements of activities related to sustainability. The tracking of sustainability projects is the task of the University Sustainability Network. The USC is responsible for the link between the Council and the Network and is entrusted with the management of sustainability-related goals. Additionally, USC supports putting sustainability actions into practice (BBS, 2017). In 2021, the tasks of the USC were delegated to CESIBUS (BBS, n.d.-b).

#### *Centre of Excellence for Sustainability Impacts in Business and Society (CESIBUS)*

The Centre was founded in 2021. CESIBUS deals with sustainability issues in research, which was previously the tasks of the USC. The goals of CESIBUS are the following: create and transfer knowledge on sustainability and responsibility, participate in national and international research, develop educational materials and conduct educational activities, and ensure visibility of the topic at higher educational level. CESIBUS focuses on two areas. The first one is research, where the centre focuses on sustainability impacts in business and sustainability impacts in education. The second focus area is education. The goal of CESIBUS is to provide up-to-date sustainability-related information to BBS's citizens, partners, and external stakeholders. Additionally, CESIBUS provides knowledge content to a mandatory course, which is a BA-level course entitled Responsible and Sustainable Company (BBS, n.d.-c).

### 4. Methodology

The methodology of the research performed in 2020 and the methodology of the research performed in 2022 are almost similar. In both cases, the main goal was to describe

the status of the implementation of BBS's sustainability-related actions. In order to be able to do that, I selected the SWOT matrix as a tool for my assessment.

A SWOT matrix is a framework which can be used to evaluate a company's (or in this case, a university's) competitive position and foster strategic planning. The framework considers the internal and external factors as well, and it also involves current and future potential. The internal factors are the Strengths and Weaknesses. During the investigation of strengths, one has to answer questions such as "What are we doing well?", and in the case of weaknesses we must give answers to questions for example "What are our detractors?" (Kenton, 2021). The external factors are Opportunities and Threats. The potential question concerning opportunities could be "What trends are evident in the marketplace?" and in the case of threats, a question could be like "Are there new regulations that potentially could harm our operations or products?" (Kenton, 2021).

The content of the SWOT matrix was determined with the help of interviews, which I conducted with 3 stakeholders of BBS's sustainability. In 2020 I conducted interviews with Rector of Budapest Business School Balázs Heidrich, Dean of the Faculty of Finance and Accounting Sára Csillag, and leader of the University Sustainability Centre Andrea Nagy. In 2022 I had the chance to conduct interviews again with Balázs Heidrich and Sára Csillag, and I had one new interviewee, Vivien Csákány, who is the Sustainability Coordinator of BBS. Additionally, I created a student questionnaire in 2022, so I could also include students' contribution in the assessment.

Finally, I had a chance to compare the content of the two SWOT matrixes, which was made possible through the use of the same research methodology.

### 5. SWOT Matrix of BBS's sustainability strategy (2020)

In this part, I introduce the results of my previous research (Szendrei-Pál, 2021). The matrix elements were identified with the help of interviews with Balázs Heidrich, Sára Csillag and Andrea Nagy conducted in 2020. The figure below summarizes the elements of the 2020 SWOT matrix (Figure 1).



Figure 1. BBS's sustainability strategy SWOT matrix (2020). Source: Szendrei-Pál, 2021

As it can be seen in Figure 1, the three most important strengths are strong focus on sustainability (by the management), the curricular reform in 2017 (which contained the

introduction of a new sustainability-related mandatory subject), and participation in the ERASMUS+ ISSUE project. Several other strengths are involved in this category, which makes BBS unique and strong in the field of higher education (Figure 2).

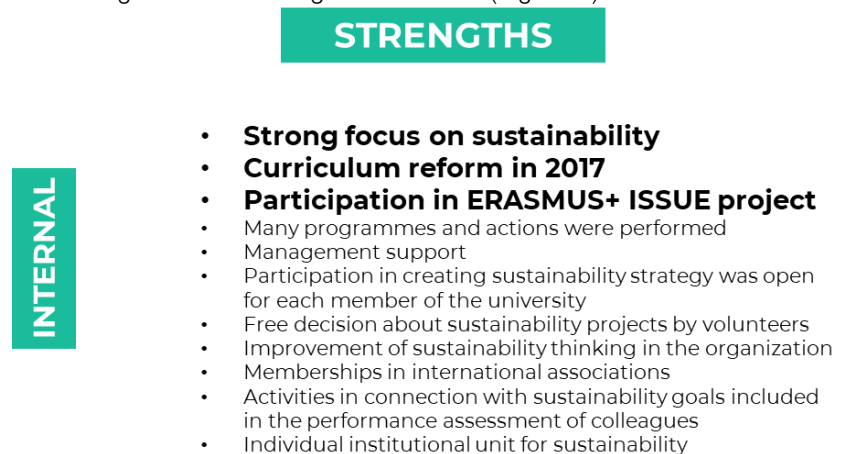


Figure 2. Strengths – SWOT matrix (2020). Source: Szendrei-Pál, 2021

Weaknesses are the internal problems, which can harm the position of BBS in contrast to other universities. The results of the interviews showed there is fluctuation in the motivation of colleagues, teachers, and students as well. Additionally, there are too many administrative burdens on colleagues. It is important to note that the interviews were conducted in the middle of the pandemic when teachers had to face several new problems. This unique situation required much more energy from teachers. Finally, the third most relevant weakness is poor communication by BBS. BBS did not communicate, for example, the strategy and programmes organized by USC (Figure 3).

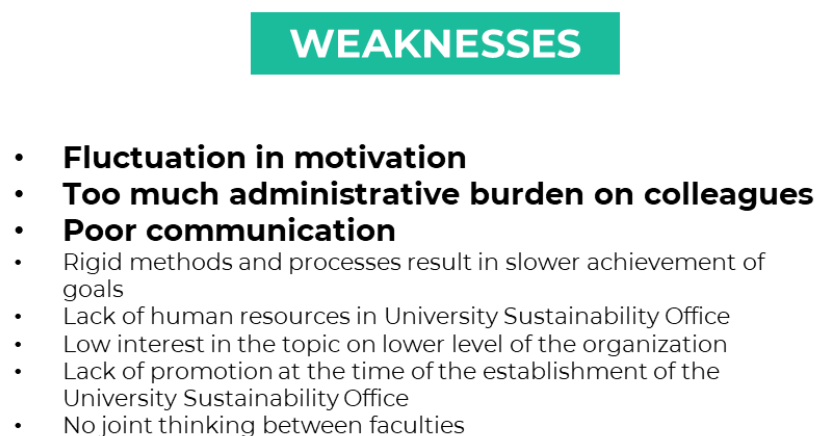


Figure 3. Weaknesses – SWOT matrix (2020). Source: Szendrei-Pál, 2021

Investigating the external dimension of the matrix can show there were several opportunities for BBS to become more sustainable than it was before 2020. BBS was in the throes of developing a new webpage, which contains more information about the USC and its activities. Another option for BBS is to continue integrating sustainability topics into relevant classes' syllabuses. With the help of it, students could obtain more knowledge and skills in connection with sustainability. The third most important possibility is to become a regional leader in Central and Eastern Europe in sustainability (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Opportunities – SWOT matrix (2020). Source: Szendrei-Pál, 2021

Finally, Covid-19 could be considered the most significant threat. Handling this completely new situation led to decreased focus on topics of sustainability. Another typical problem in higher education is insistence on bureaucratic methods. Such a circumstance makes it harder to receive funding for sustainability projects, and the realization of the goals is also harder in such a scenario (Figure 5).

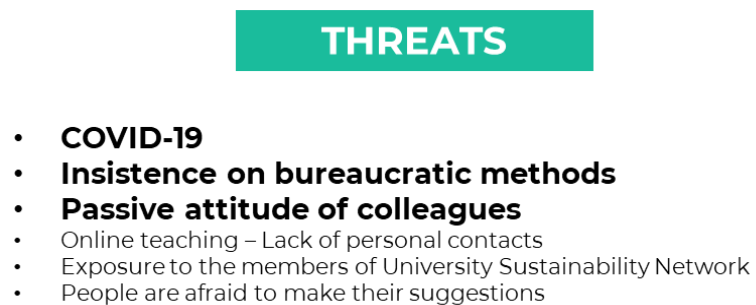


Figure 5. Threats – SWOT matrix (2020). Source: Szendrei-Pál, 2021

The above-described SWOT matrix can be considered a starting point of my current research. During the new data collection process, I focused on each element of the 2020 SWOT matrix, and I tried to obtain information about changes related to all categories.

## 6. New data collection

In this section, the results of the new data collection will be introduced. First, the details of the interviews are presented, and after that the questions and answers of the questionnaire will follow.

### *Interviews*

In April 2020, 3 interviews were conducted. I asked Rector of Budapest Business School Balázs Heidrich about the effects of model change from the state-owned to foundation-owned structure and about the effects of the pandemic on sustainability strategy and on the management's thinking. I also conducted an interview with Dean of the Faculty of Finance and Accounting Sára Csillag. Among other things, she helped me to get an overview of the management's attitude towards the topic of sustainability. Sustainability Coordinator of BBS Vivien Csákány gave me insights into the past 1.5 year's actions by the University

Sustainability Centre. The result of the interviews will not be introduced separately: the SWOT matrix will contain all viewpoints communicated as part of the study.

### Questionnaires

The questionnaire was filled in by 153 of Budapest Business School's students. 81.2% of the students are from the Faculty and Finance and Accounting.

I investigated students' knowledge about what sustainability means. The answers showed that 94.2% of students know the meaning of sustainability. Also, 92.9% of students pay at least moderate attention to sustainability in their everyday life.

The figure below shows the order of those listed factors that can contribute the most extensively to the development of students' sustainability related knowledge.

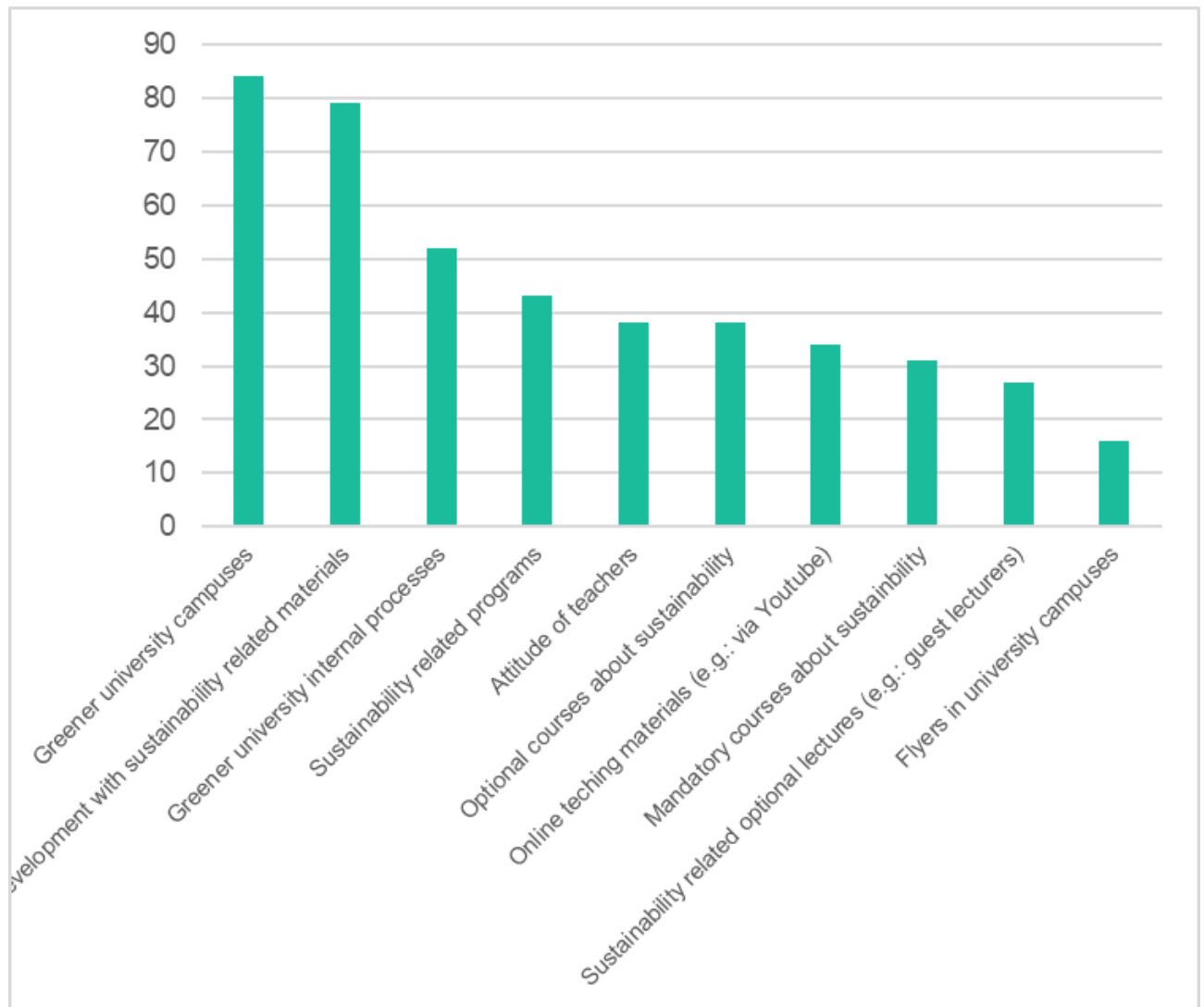


Figure 6. The order of elements contributing most to the development of students' sustainability-related knowledge.

Source: Own work

In the questionnaire, students had to choose the three most important elements that could help them to improve their sustainability-related knowledge. As shown in Figure 6, greener university campuses, curriculum development with sustainability-related materials, and greener internal university processes are the three most important factors.

Figure 3 shows the order of the elements which are the most necessary for a university to call itself a green university.

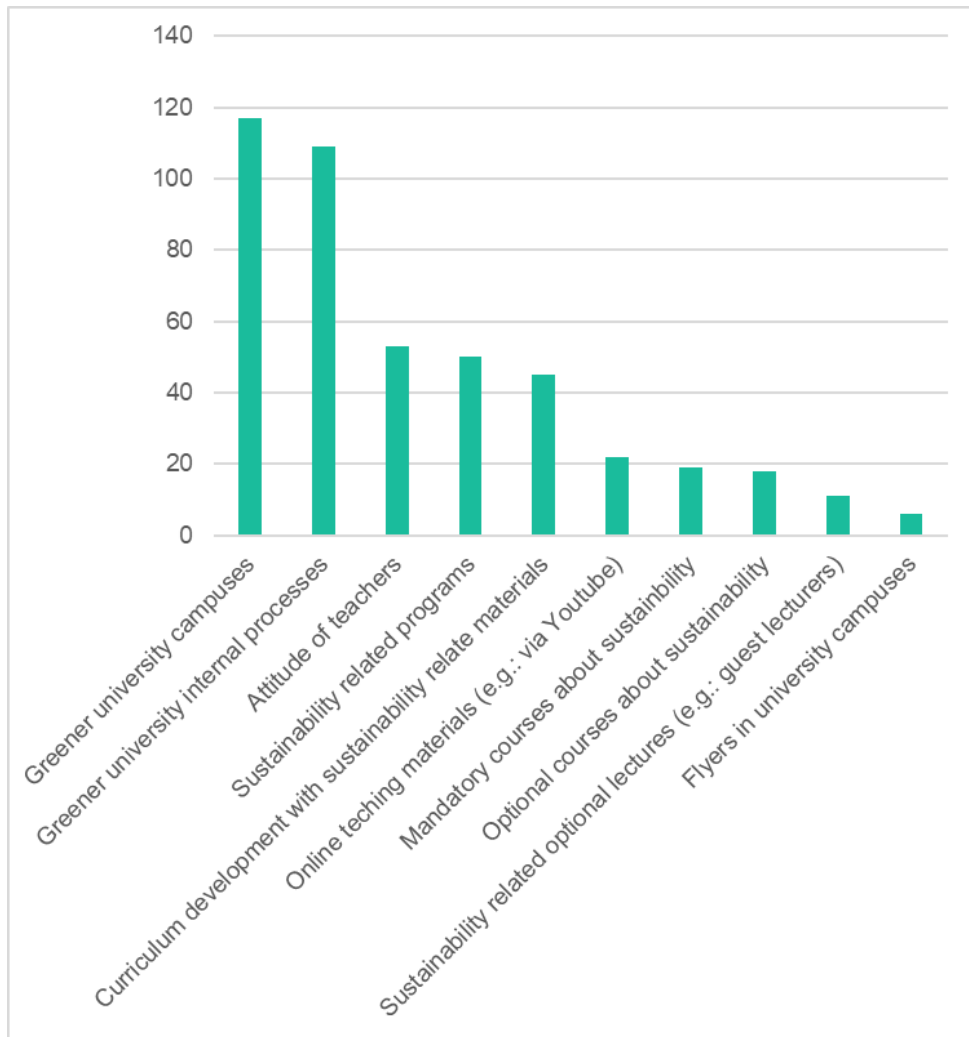


Figure 7. The order of elements most necessary for a university to call itself a green university. *Source: Own work*

In this case, the students had to choose the three most important elements again. As it can be seen in Figure 7, “*greener university campuses*” is still in the first place, then “*greener internal university processes*” follows, and finally the “*attitude of teachers*” is the third most important aspect for the students.

The last figure shows to what extent the given factors contributed to students’ current knowledge about sustainability. The students had to answer questions with a 1-7 Likert scale, where 1 meant not at all, 7 meant to a great extent. The averages can be seen below.

The attitude of teachers received the highest average (3.76). Mandatory courses in the curriculum followed with an average of 3.39, and the third most relevant element is optional courses about sustainability (3.22).

The other results of the questionnaire are presented in the new SWOT matrix.



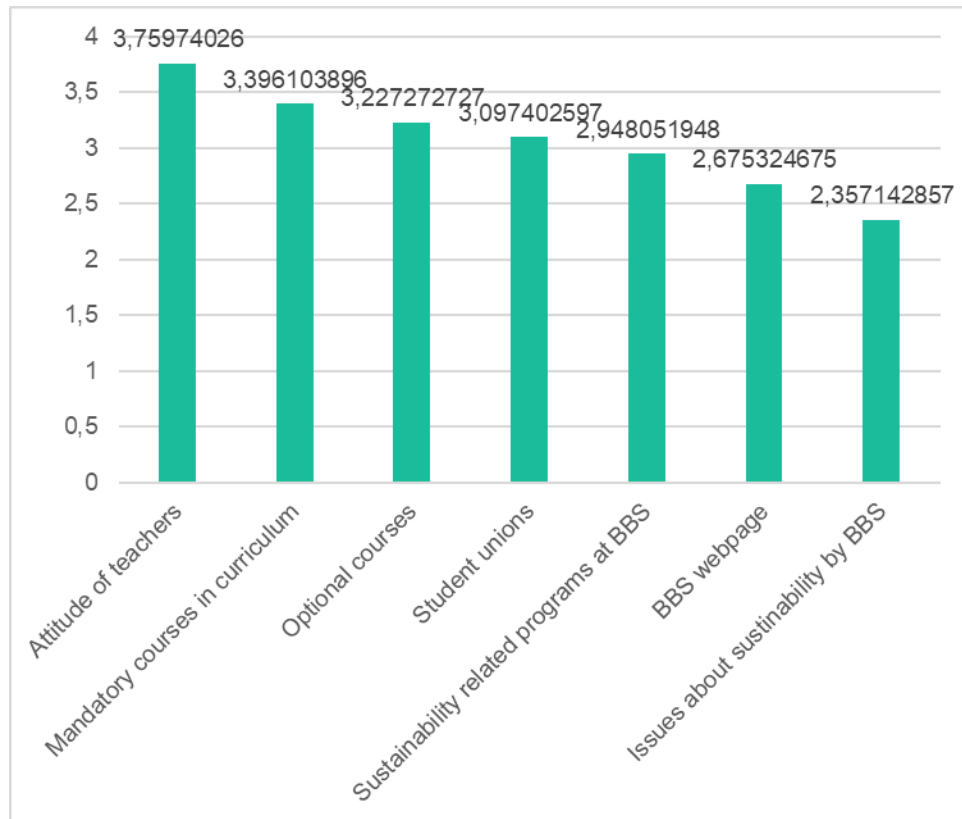


Figure 8. Average of extent given elements contribute to students' current knowledge about sustainability. *Source: Own work*

## 7. Introducing the new SWOT matrix

As a result of the new interviews and questionnaire, the SWOT matrix of BBS's sustainability strategy could be updated. The figure below introduces the updated matrix (Figure 9).

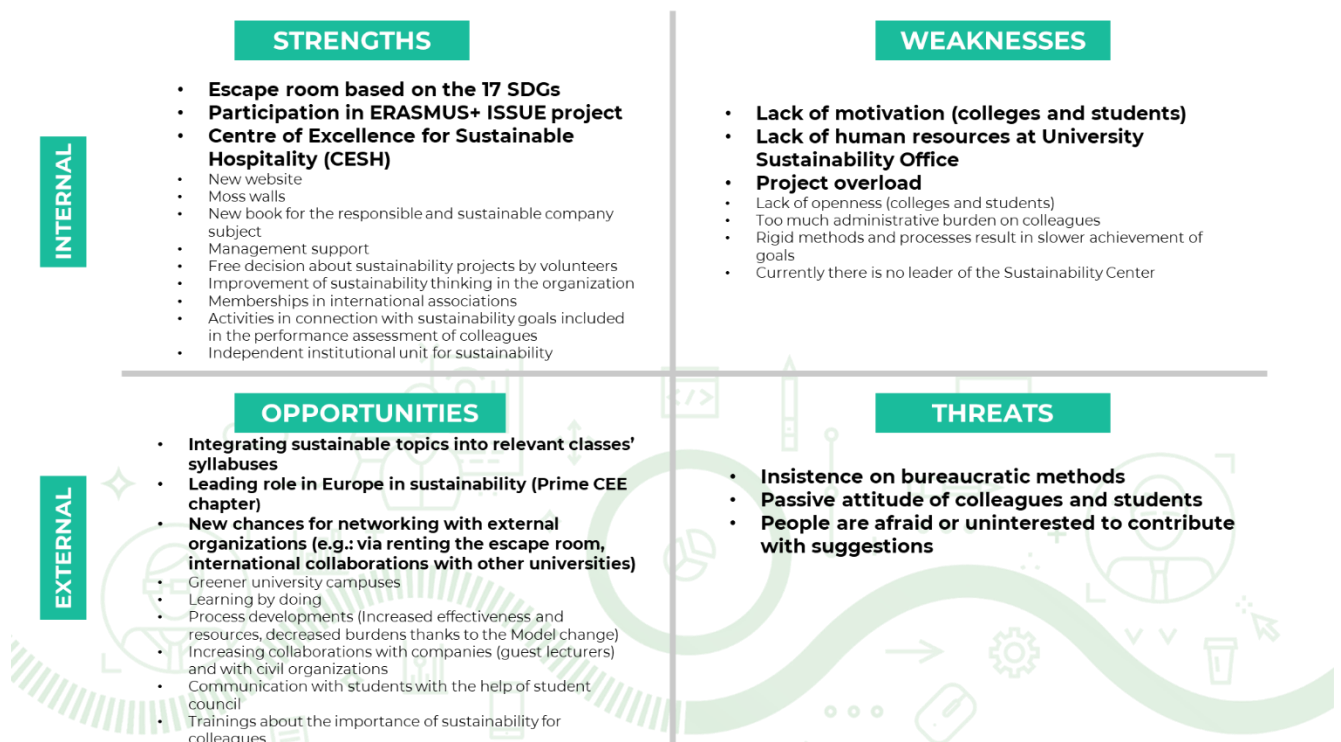


Figure 9. BBS's sustainability strategy SWOT matrix (2022). *Source: Own work*

One of the strengths of BBS's sustainability is the new and innovative escape room based on the 17 SDGs. The room is available for each student of the university so that they can learn and play at the same time. Additionally, BBS participate in the ERASMUS+ ISSUE project, which ensures a strong international network, for example with other universities. It is also essential to highlight the new Centre of Excellence of BBS (CESIBUS), which strongly focuses on sustainability (Figure 10).



Figure 10. Strengths – SWOT matrix (2020). *Source: Own work*

Two great weaknesses of the University are the lack of motivation (colleges and students) and the lack of human resources in the field of sustainability. Currently, there is no leader at USC, but job interviews were started, so hopefully this weakness will not last long. Additionally, there are several projects which resulted in teachers' project overload. This means they have no time for sustainability-related actions (Figure 11).

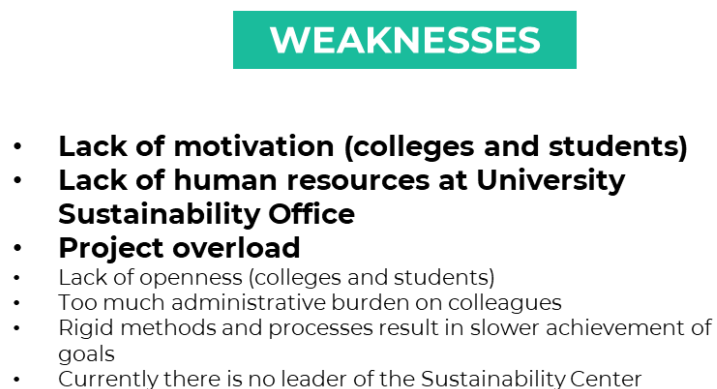


Figure 11. Weaknesses – SWOT matrix (2020). *Source: Own work*

As for the opportunities of BBS, the University has the opportunity to integrate sustainable topics into relevant classes' syllabuses. Apart from this, the institution also has the opportunity to obtain a leading role in Europe in sustainability (PRME, n.d.-b). The University also has new chances for networking with external organizations (e.g.: via renting the escape room, international collaborations with other universities, etc.) (Figure 12).



Figure 12. Opportunities – SWOT matrix (2020). *Source: Own work*

Finally, there are threats like insistence on bureaucratic methods, passive attitude of colleagues and students, and the fact that people are afraid or uninterested to make suggestions about sustainability projects.

## 8. Comparing the content of the matrixes

In connection with the strengths, it is clear there is still a strong focus on sustainability at BBS. Additionally, sustainability topics at the university still enjoy the support of the management. The webpage, which was earlier in the opportunity category, has been completed, and it can be categorized as a strength. The main difference related to sustainability projects is that there were few large projects completed in the past years instead of many small projects.

Investigating the changes in weaknesses, it can be seen that the lack of human resources at the CESIBUS and the lack of student and teacher motivation are still relevant. A new element here is the project overload of teachers who do not have extra energy for sustainability projects. Earlier poor communication led to problems, but in 2022 it is not a problem any more thanks to cooperation with the Student Union and to the new website.

In connection with the opportunities, there is more chance to build stronger networks (e.g., the escape room can be rented by anyone). Furthermore, significant development has been achieved through cooperation with student unions (e.g., help in communication). Teachers' training is still relevant, there have been no changes related to this.

Finally, the greatest change related to threats is that COVID is weaker but has still not completely disappeared from everyday life. In addition to this, there have been no relevant changes in connection with bureaucratic methods, which still can cause problems while a sustainability action or project is being carried out.

## 9. Conclusions

This paper provided a short summary of the most important documents and organisations related to the sustainability of higher education institutions. After that, the old and new SWOT matrixes of BBS's sustainability strategy were introduced and compared. Thanks to this new research, developments and contemporary challenges could be identified. The most important findings of the review are summarized below.

In the past years, COVID was not the only factor that affected BBS's development in a sustainable way. The University also had to face the so-far unknown impacts of model change. While COVID has mostly a negative impact on progress, model change offers several opportunities (e.g., more resources to sustainable goals, flexibility). However, it can also have positive effects on the University's strategy in the long term, but it had some side effects in the

short term (e.g., focus loss). Furthermore, the new leader of the USC can bring in new opportunities and can start again some old and unfinished projects.

Finally, it is important to draw attention to the limitations of this research. On the one hand, during the interviews and questionnaire assessments, I usually experienced controversial viewpoints expressed by the respondents. The reason behind it could be that the actors see the same process from a different angle depending on their position in the organization. On the other hand, the respondents of the students' questionnaire are mostly from only one faculty of BBS, namely from the Faculty of Finance and Accounting. As it was explained above, there is still no joint thinking among the faculties, so the opinion of students from the other two faculties could be different than the opinion of students from the Faculty of Finance and Accounting. At the same time, the sample selection has its own weaknesses, and the results of this study can be a good starting point for future research when a new survey is announced concerning the same topic at the university.

To sum up, BBS is a great example to follow for other universities from Hungary and from CEE as well, because of its outstanding efforts and commitments toward sustainability. The three pillars of sustainability (Strategy, USO, and CESIBUS) make BBS special in CEE region and could serve as a model for other higher education institutions on how to put SDGs into practice.

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