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Higher education for sustainable development in Flanders: balancing between normative and transformative approaches

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ABSTRACT
This paper provides critical reflections on higher education for sustainable development (HESD) from a philosophical perspective. A theoretical framework is developed, based on John Dewey’s thoughts on the aim of democracy and the critical role of education herein, and with specific focus on two constructs: ‘initiative and adaptability’ and ‘values and virtues’. This theoretical framework is used to analyze HESD in Flanders, from a historical and socio-political perspective. The Flemish case shows a gradual evolution from a focus on environmental management on campus, followed by a normative interpretation of what HESD should look like, and a more transformative approach in light of citizenship and democratic ideals. The case also shows considerable exchange of information between Flanders and the Netherlands, in which Dutch models and instruments were used in the Flemish context. The philosophical perspective provides a theoretical grounding of the field of HESD, which enables us to further develop the field, with a specific focus on initiative and adaptability on the one hand, and the importance of a virtues perspective on the other.

1. Introduction
Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD) displays a variety of approaches and initiatives to integrate sustainability in different dimensions of higher education (HE), discussed in Section 1.1 (Lozano et al. 2015; Vaughter et al. 2013). These approaches can also be linked with general educational and more specific Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) discourses. HESD could be seen as a specific subject within the broader ESE field. As a research field however, HESD is characterized by a lack of conceptual frameworks and theory building, as discussed in Section 1.2 (Corcoran, Walker, and Wals 2004; Karatzoglou 2013).

1.1. Different approaches in HESD
Different approaches are identified within the HESD field. Derived from a series of charters and declarations on sustainability in higher education, Lozano et al. (2013) defined seven dimensions of HESD: (1) institutional framework; (2) campus operations; (3) education; (4) research; (5) outreach and collaboration; (6) on-campus experiences; (7) assessment and reporting. However, not all dimensions appear...
in the literature, which predominantly focuses on two approaches: campus operations and educational initiatives (Vaughter et al. 2013; Wals 2014; Wals and Blewitt 2010).

Interventions in campus operations are often technical and instrumental by nature, e.g. sustainable buildings, ecological or carbon footprint analysis, renewable energy sources, environmental management systems and waste recycling. Such initiatives could be labelled as 'greening the campus', sometimes connected with educational and research initiatives as well, stating that a university needs to practice what it preaches in its curriculum (Lambrechts and Van Liedekerke 2014). The greening the campus approach has led to a number of successful initiatives, oriented towards encouraging universities to develop sustainability on campus, e.g. LEED certification for green buildings, based in the United States but operating worldwide (Cidell 2009), and the EcoCampus environmental management and award system in the United Kingdom (Disterheft et al. 2012).

Educational approaches focus on curriculum, competences, pedagogies, learning and instruction (Wals and Blewitt 2010). Contemporary HE is characterized by competence-based approaches, grounded in social constructivism, and the conceptualisation of competences for sustainable development (SD) has become an important approach in the field of HESD. Starting point in such approaches is the argument that students need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to deal with complex and uncertain sustainability issues in society (Lambrechts and Van Petegem 2016). A variety of models and sets have been developed, however there seems to be a consensus towards the main characteristics of these competences, i.e.: systems-thinking, anticipatory thinking, normative competence, strategic competence and interpersonal competence (Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman 2011). These initiatives could be labelled as normative and instrumental approaches, in which HE should integrate competences in order to ‘solve’ sustainability issues. Such an interpretation, in which sustainability is seen as a problem for which competences can offer a solution, might be problematic, as the concept of sustainability does not allow for such instrumental, linear methods (see Section 1.2 on this issue). However, this is not applicable for all interpretations of sustainability competences.

Other educational approaches start from the social and societal role of HE in the transition process towards more sustainable societies. These approaches originated in a postmodern context, in which the uncertainty of knowledge and the variety of perspectives are acknowledged. Education thus needs to reposition itself in such a dynamic and diverse context. Rather than equipping students with a fixed set of competences or learning outcomes, education provides the necessary conditions to enable students to become critical and active participants in society. This approach can be labelled as the transformative approach of education (Sterling 2010), in which sustainability is not seen as an end goal, nor a problem to be solved. Rather, the critical and transformative capabilities of the learner are central in this approach (Jickling and Wals 2008).

These different approaches reveal an eclectic field of normative and transformative perspectives. However, it should be stated that the approaches should not be seen as dualistic, they rather blend and influence each other. Therefore, the possibilities and importance to combine them should be emphasized. Different approaches could also, to a greater or lesser extent, be detected in the field of HESD in Flanders, which is the subject of this paper. The eclectic field of HESD also has consequences for its philosophical and theoretical framing, as will be explored in the next section.

1.2. HESD in need of philosophical grounding

HESD is a growing research field, with increasing numbers of articles published in academic peer reviewed journals (Karatzoglou 2013). Despite the advances, the HESD field is characterized by a lack of rigorous conceptual frameworks in theoretical articles, and an abundance of descriptive case studies with limited value to theory development (Corcoran, Walker, and Wals 2004; Karatzoglou 2013). A thorough philosophical grounding of the field could contribute to the development of conceptual frameworks for HESD, however such grounding is often missing.

The lack of framing current ESE research activities in broader (educational) philosophical perspectives has been described by Sund and Lysgaard (2013). A philosophical grounding is often missing in HESD research and literature as well. Some earlier works in the field however attempt to provide such
grounding. For instance Huckle’s contribution in which critical realism provides a philosophical framework for HESD. According to Huckle (2004), tensions between mainstream Marxist and postmodern environmentalisms could be resolved by critical realism. In critical realism, a weak social constructivist notion is accepted and combined with the ability to construct a new grand narrative of sustainability. This notion of building a new grand sustainability narrative is however contested in postmodern philosophical movements and it might even be contested by the nature of sustainability itself, as Huckle states that ‘what is sustainable and beneficial in one time, place and culture, may be unsustainable and destructive in another’ (Huckle 2004, 43).

Given the contested notion of sustainability as a new grand narrative (Huckle 2004), it might be worthwhile to explore possibilities to frame the concept of HESD in other philosophical movements. Some initiatives in this direction have already been undertaken. For example, Jickling and Wals (2008), make explicit reference to Dewey’s notion of democracy, and present a heuristic model to interpret education in the context of SD. The model is based on two axes, representing specific perspectives on ‘education’ and the social role of the ‘educated person’. Four quadrants are presented in their heuristic model. Quadrant I represents a transmissive approach to education, combined with an authoritative view of social interactions. In this quadrant, education is regarded in an instrumental way, as a tool to realize SD goals. This view is contested in two ways. First, SD is seen as a desired outcome, a destination to be reached. Second, it reduces education to a way to transmit the preferred message or ideology, hence it could easily lead to indoctrination. Quadrants II and III are characterized by a perspective on education and the social role of the educated person, still framed within the concept of SD, but providing more freedom to develop participatory approaches in education (quadrant II) or in ascribing transformative aims (quadrant III). Yet, the main aim of both quadrants is SD, and it might be contested whether this concept can be accepted in the context of academic freedom and intellectual liberty. Quadrant IV presents a perspective that has the potential to go beyond the concept of SD. It builds upon socio-constructivist views on education and a participatory role of the educated person in society (Jickling and Wals 2008).

More recently, an attempt to frame HESD explicitly in the philosophical writings of John Dewey is the contribution by Tarrant and Thiele (2016). They use Dewey’s Democracy and Education (1916) to provide historical and theoretical grounding for HESD, more specifically the aspect of competences for SD. Three notions as described by Dewey are referred to in this grounding: interdependence, fallibilism, and experimentalism. Dewey described interdependencies in communities between social and political phenomena, as well as local to global scales. As such, his understanding of interdependence could provide theoretical and historical grounding for systems thinking, a key competence for SD. Furthermore, Dewey interprets scientific knowledge as fallible, and as a result of critical inquiry, new knowledge will emerge. The notion of fallibilism calls for experimentalism, understood as an iterative process of trial-and-error, with the purpose to adapt to new situations. According to Tarrant and Thiele, the notions of fallibilism and experimentalism provide theoretical and historical grounding for the concept of ‘adaptive co-management’ of ecological systems. Adaptive co-management requires an education that enables citizens to actively contribute to the ecological issues, e.g. through acquiring competences for SD (Tarrant and Thiele 2016).

It should also be mentioned that within the general ESE literature, philosophical perspectives are often explored: e.g. issues of pluralism (Lijmbach et al. 2002; Öhman 2006; Rudsberg and Öhman 2014), ethical and normative perspectives (Gough and Scott 2006; Jickling 2004, 2009; Kronlid and Öhman 2013; Öhman 2016), values (Garrison, Östman, and Håkansson 2015; Manni, Sporre, and Ottander 2016), ecofeminism (Fawcett 2000; Harvester and Blenkinsop 2010), deconstructionism approaches (Bai et al. 2015; Gough and Price 2004). Many of these authors use pragmatism (see Sections 1.3 and 3) as a theoretical framework in their research. General ESE perspectives could enrich the debate regarding HESD, by providing specific guidelines to enhance the philosophical and theoretical grounding of the field (Sherren 2008).

1.3. Aim and structure of the paper

The aim of this paper is to provide philosophical grounding for HESD, based on the case of Flanders, and framed in John Dewey’s work regarding education and democracy. The theoretical framework
provides four strands, used to analyze the Flemish case, based on a number of government initiatives to encourage HESD.

This specific focus has been chosen because of the implicit synergies between Dewey’s thoughts and the current discourses on ESE and HESD. John Dewey is regarded as a highly influential American philosopher writing in the first half of the twentieth century, and belonging to the pragmatism movement. His influence in philosophy ranged from logic, metaphysics, ethics, aesthetics, and epistemology. Outside of philosophy, his influence was apparent in theoretical and practical fields such as education, social psychology and political science (Sidorsky 1977). In ‘Democracy and Education’ (1916), Dewey describes the aims of education in the context of the relationship between education and democracy. Education has a primary social function: to prepare citizens to participate in the life of the group to which they belong. Education thus has an individual aim, to prepare individual citizens to lead meaningful lives in their society, and a social aim, to improve democratic processes in society (Dewey 1916). Dewey’s writings on democracy and education provide a theoretical framework (Section 3) to interpret the field of HESD in Flanders (and in a wider context as well).²

Based on the theoretical framework, Section 4 presents the case of HESD in Flanders. Section 5 discusses the philosophical grounding of the Flemish HESD field. Given the lack of conceptual frameworks and theory development in HESD literature (as described by Corcoran, Walker, and Wals 2004; Karatzoglou 2013), this philosophical perspective is essential to get the HESD field (back) on track, not only in Flanders but also in a wider (European, Western or global) context. Section 6 concludes this paper with specific recommendations to further develop the field.

2. Method

The case has been developed through an action research approach, in which the lead author was involved in many of the initiatives highlighted in the case, whether as a researcher or as a critical friend. The involvement was not restricted by project-based initiatives or funding, and therefore spanned over a period of nine years (2007–2016). This long and intense involvement enabled to develop a deep understanding of the context, the specific influencing factors, and the process of change that occurred. Action research emerged as an approach in social sciences, embedded in critical theory. It is a way to pursue a transformation in the theory or practice focused upon. The constant evolving of society and reality, the ability to transform, and the importance of values are basic principles of critical theory. Action research approaches are widely used in the context of sustainability research, and the contribution of the researcher in the role of critical friend enables first hand experiences in the change process towards HESD (Cebrián 2016; Cebrián, Grace, and Humphris 2012).

3. Theoretical framework: Dewey’s thoughts on democracy and education

HESD is in need of a theoretical and philosophical grounding. This paper provides such grounding from a Deweyan perspective. Dewey’s critical thoughts, despite being written more than 100 years ago, show implicit synergies to the current HESD field framed within neoliberal discourses.

Dewey’s important book on Democracy and Education (1916) describes his ideas of how education contributes to society. His thoughts on the role of education in democracy are not published in this one manuscript, but in a variety of books, articles and essays. Deriving a theoretical framework based on his work requires a thorough reading and, because of the vast amount of his publications, requires some practical choices as well. The sources used to develop the theoretical framework are mentioned throughout the text. For a number of sources the Dutch translations by Berding (2011) have been used.

The theoretical framework is developed along four strands: (1) interplay and change in democracy; (2) the ultimate aim of democracy; (3) the critical role of education in democracy; (4) ethical aspects in education and democracy. Each of these strands will be discussed in the subsequent sections, and will lead to the two central constructs in our theoretical framework: ‘initiative and adaptability’ and ‘values and virtues’.
3.1. Interplay and change in democracy

Rather than interpreting democracy as a solely political and institutional concept, Dewey brings social and economic aspects to the fore. He thereby points towards the interplay of different dimensions (social, political, economic, cultural) in a democracy. He critiques economic tendencies towards efficiency without taking into account social aspects and human factors:

The tendency to reduce such things as efficiency of activity and scientific management to purely technical externals is evidence of the one-sided stimulation of thought given to those in control of industry – those who supply its aims. Because of their lack of all-round and well-balanced social interest, there is not sufficient stimulus for attention to the human factors and relationships in industry. Intelligence is narrowed to the factors concerned with technical production and marketing of goods. (Dewey 1916, 98–99)

Furthermore, in a context of rapid changes and increasing international and global relations, Dewey stated that part of the democratic ideal was to ensure that its citizens are capable to deal with occurring changes. He interpreted change not necessarily as negative or threatening, as long as citizens understand the significance and direction of change, and the different connections between influencing factors:

A society which is mobile, which is full of channels for the distribution of a change occurring anywhere, must see to it that its members are educated to personal initiative and adaptability. Otherwise, they will get overwhelmed by the changes in which they are caught and whose significance or connections they do not perceive. The result will be a confusion in which a few will appropriate to themselves the results of the blind and externally directed activities of others. (Dewey 1916, 102)

3.2. The ultimate aim of democracy

Regarding the aim of democracy, interpreted as the continuous change and interplay between social and economic factors, Dewey stresses the importance of the process prevailing in democracy, oriented towards improvement of the life of everyone involved. As such, the experience of learning and living meaningful lives in a democratic society are the key aspect to focus on, and not the static end-results imposed by economic driving forces.

Dewey had clear thoughts on which kind of democracy needs to be fostered, i.e. a participative and creative democracy. Again, the critical notes towards the economic influence on society, and the lack of critical analysis of it, becomes clear in his 1939 text ‘Creative Democracy – the task before us’:

Unused resources are now human rather than material. They are found in the waste of grown men and women who are without the chance to work, and in the young men and young women who find doors closed where there was once opportunity. (Dewey 1939, 12–17)

In this text, Dewey also provides his philosophical perspective on democracy:

Democracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained, so that special results achieved are of ultimate value only as they are used to enrich and order the ongoing process. Since the process of experience is capable of being educative, faith in democracy is all one with faith in experience and education. (Dewey 1939, 12–17)

3.3. The critical role of education in democracy

Following the role of education in these social, economic and political context, Dewey is clear: ‘the very idea of education as a freeing of individual capacity in a progressive growth directed to social aims’ (Dewey 1916, 115). Dewey warned against an overly economic interpretation, in which education is solely preparing students for a job on the market. He pointed towards the important aim of education to provide enlightened and flexible workers, in order to be able to cope with rapid (industrial and societal) changes. He strongly opposed to dualisms (e.g. self-world, soul-body, nature-God) and stressed that a democracy should foster unity of vocational and general education, unity of assessment and
instruction, unity of thought and action, unity of subject matter and the mental operations to deal with it, and unity of work, school and everyday life (Fishman and McCarthy 1998; Herrick 1996).

In September 1922, Dewey held a lecture for the State Conference of Normal School Instructors in Bridgewater, Massachusetts, which has been published under the title ‘Social purposes in education’ (Dewey 1923). In the context of the economic crisis in the United States, Dewey referred to the problems that were more complex than the problems faced in the past, and that required more intelligence of people in a democracy. He criticized current education for teaching students institutional and political facts, without taking into account the driving forces (e.g. economic) behind them. As a result, students leave school without the ability to critically think about the processes and problems in society. Rather than teaching students factual knowledge, Dewey claims that more focus is needed towards the development of critical and general capabilities of the individual, oriented towards imagination, inventiveness, and initiative. Here, he sees an important role of the arts and humanities as well (Berding 2011; Dewey 1923).

A contemporary interpretation of such capabilities and the role of the humanities in education is provided by Martha Nussbaum, who proposes ten ‘central capabilities’: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; empathy with other species; play; control over one’s environment (Nussbaum 2010, 2011). The fulfilment of capabilities depends on the individual, and is expressed in ‘functionings’, the combination of all actions one does in order to lead his or her life. Some of them are rather instrumental, e.g. reading, writing, having a job, while others are more complex, e.g. being happy, leading a healthy lifestyle, etc. Nussbaum identifies three levels of functionings (or functional capabilities): basic, internal, and combined. Central in the internal functionings is the aspect of choice. A person can choose to act in a certain way, but does not need to (Lessmann 2009; Nussbaum 2000). A central question in Nussbaum’s approach is the balance between ethical responsibility to humanity as a whole, and the responsibility toward our closest companions in life. However, Nussbaum’s capabilities approach contains a gap between how people decide to live their life and how their decisions are made.

As Lessmann (2009) points out, what is missing is ‘a model of the temporal interactions between achieved functionings and the capability set’ (Lessmann 2009, 454). In order to provide a starting point to fill this gap in the capabilities approach, Lessmann proposes Dewey’s approach, and his writings on experience in particular. Dewey distinguishes two principles in experience: continuity and interaction. Continuity points to the fact that an individual builds upon previous experiences when gaining new experiences. Interaction means that every experience arises in a specific context, and because of that specific context. Experience thus has internal factors (the individual’s history) and external factors (the social and material environment) (Lessmann 2009).

3.4. Ethical aspects in education and democracy

A final strand in our theoretical framework is provided by a text from the later works of Dewey, ‘The Democratic Faith and Education’, from 1944. In this text, he explicitly refers to the devastating effects of far reaching efficiency measures on society, with an outlook to the future as well:

The failure of cooperative and collective intelligence and effort to intervene was an invitation to immediate short-term intervention by those who had an eye to their own profit. The consequences were wholesale destruction and waste of natural resources, increase of social instability, and mortgaging of the future to a transitory and brief present of so-called prosperity. (Dewey 1944, 276)

He also refers to the role of education to help students become critical citizens, and foresees an important role in science and technology as well, however different from how it was implemented in education back than:

When this is seen, it will also be seen how little has actually been done in our schools to render science and technology active agencies in creating the attitudes and dispositions and in securing the kinds of knowledge that are capable of coping with the problems of men and women today. (Dewey 1944, 280)
In this respect, Dewey calls to ‘humanize science’ in order to be truly helpful to democracy: ‘in this achievement science, education, and the democratic cause meet as one’ (Dewey 1944, 283). Regarding values and virtues, Dewey reconnects to the Aristotelian concept of leading ‘the good life’, by doing what is thought of as ‘the right thing to do’ under certain circumstances. Dewey points towards two extremes in such a perspective. On the one hand, the interpretation that virtues are universalisable values, on the other hand a pluralistic and relativistic interpretation in which virtues differ according to the context and are equally valuable. Rather than falling into a dualistic discourse, Dewey tries to reconceptualize the issues, resulting in a ‘conception of virtue that is sensitive to history and culture but that also enables judgment as to which characteristics ought to be viewed as virtues’ (Rice 1996, 271).

For Dewey, virtues are essentially to be seen as interactions with the individual’s environment (social, physical). He also rejects the dualistic separation between ‘moral qualities’ and qualities that have no moral significance. Dewey points towards the fact that some virtues are the result of customs and thus prone to criticism if such customs are the product of a ruling institution or a given social group. Furthermore, he points towards the importance of moral progress, as an experimental process, reflecting on previous experiences. As such, this progress is not oriented towards an ideal or an end result, but on the process itself, which is temporary and leads to new needs and problems: ‘Growth is the quality that enables Dewey to reject essentialist and universalistic conceptions of virtue, without also embracing radical relativism’ (Rice 1996, 276). Contemporary perspectives regarding virtues, modifying and balancing each other (e.g. Rorty 1988), are in line with such Deweyan interpretation of latent virtues.

3.5. Central constructs in our theoretical framework

The theoretical framework deployed here is constructed along a number of statements. In Dewey’s writings, the democratic society is seen as the complex interplay of institutional, social and economic factors. This interplay aims at a growth, a movement, an improvement in a certain direction which is influenced by different forces, not always visible for its citizens. Therefore, education bears a critical role in a democratic society. Ideally, it prepares its citizens to lead flourishing and active lives, and provides the capabilities to analyze driving forces and their impact in democracy. The ultimate goal then, according to Dewey, is to contribute to a creative and participative democracy, in which its citizens strive for social improvement rather than maintaining conservative traditions (if they pose a negative influence on the citizens of the society).

This theoretical framework reveals specific tensions between different perspectives on the role of education and the direction of society. The call for social improvement in a creative and participative democracy is strongly opposed by the ever growing attention towards economic and financial efficiency, overpowering the role of social and human factors. The call for education to focus on initiative and adaptability on the one hand, and values and virtues on the other, is strongly opposed by educational models inspired by economic efficiency, focusing on the transmission of factual knowledge and instrumental skills, and the lack of critical inquiry. The theoretical framework and the tensions are now used to analyze and interpret the field of HESD in Flanders, with specific attention towards the following constructs:

- education preparing for initiative and adaptability of citizens;
- education infused by values and virtues (from the perspective of leading ‘the good life’).

4. Introduction to the case: a historical view

The federal state Belgium is divided into three communities: the Flemish community (Flanders), the French community and the German-speaking community. Education and ESD are specific responsibilities of the communities’ governments, and the initiatives and outcomes at different communities shall
thus vary accordingly. Therefore, in this paper, we will focus on the specific context in Flanders. Flanders is the northern region of Belgium, the main language of the Flemish region is Dutch.

HESD in Flanders has a history with diverse backgrounds, both on a policy level and the level of practical initiatives in the field. On a policy level, HE was put on the agenda as a result of the initiative ‘Environmental Care in School’ (Milieuzorg op School, MOS), initially focusing on primary and secondary schools, and from 2004 onwards also focusing on HE through the project Ecocampus.4 The first action of Ecocampus was the development of hands on guidelines to set up an environmental management system (EMS) in higher education institutions (HEIs). These guidelines were developed in collaboration with HEI researchers and representatives, through public procurement (Tratsaert et al. 2007). The first initiative to introduce HESD in Flanders was thus oriented towards environmental approaches in campus operations, and Ecocampus initially financed environmental coaches for all Flemish university associations (i.e. the close collaboration between universities and university colleges, Huisman and Mampaey 2017) to guide the implementation process of environmental care in the HEIs. This can be described as the first phase of the Ecocampus project.

In the meantime, a new initiative emerged, in which the concept of SD was introduced by means of participatory learning networks for HEI representatives. Project DOEN! was led by an NGO focusing on business ethics and education, and funded by the Flemish government. The project organized several thematic learning networks, e.g. for teacher training, social work, business studies. The project also succeeded in having a regional charter for sustainable higher education, which was eventually signed by all university associations, representing all Flemish HEIs. In 2008, the project was renewed under the name ‘Sustainable Higher Education Flanders’ (Duurzaam Hoger Onderwijs Vlaanderen, DHO Vlaanderen) (Lambrechts, Van den Haute, and Vanhoren 2009). Project funding stopped in 2010 and the initiative was not prolonged. Instead, the remaining learning networks were transferred to Ecocampus, which at that time was preparing its second phase.

The second phase of Ecocampus started in 2011, and was characterized by a renewed definition of the aims of the project, in which the environmental scope was broadened towards ‘sustainable higher education’. This was the outcome of a process of collaboration with Project DOEN! (later DHO Vlaanderen), eventually resulting in taking over the learning networks after that project had been dissolved. Furthermore, the renewed Ecocampus project aimed at developing and providing specific tools and guidelines for the integration of sustainability in HEIs (Ecocampus 2012). Among these tools are a guidebook to integrate competences for SD in the learning outcomes of different study programs, and a general HESD framework ‘Sustainable Higher Education. Understanding and moving forward’, commissioned to be written by a group of academics active in the field (Waas et al. 2012). The learning networks also developed tools to enable the integration of sustainability. This process already started in the Project DOEN!, especially the thematic learning network on social work, and was now further facilitated by Ecocampus, resulting in a competency framework for teacher training, and a hands-on toolkit for business studies. Other activities during the second phase are the organization of a variety of thematic conferences: e.g. systems thinking, educational initiatives, competences for SD (Lambrechts, Verhulst, and Rymenams 2017; Rymenams and Lambrechts 2015). In 2015, Ecocampus entered its third phase. The Flemish government has decided that it will be structurally embedded in the Department of Environment, Nature and Energy, and this for an unlimited period of time (Ecocampus 2015).

Apart from Ecocampus and Project DOEN!, other initiatives emerged as well. At a policy level, the ESD platform was launched in response to the Flemish commitment to the ESD Strategy developed by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE 2005). The platform is oriented towards educational organizations in formal, non-formal and informal settings, and some Flemish HEIs also participate as well (Van Poeck, Vandenabeele, and Bruyninckx 2014). In 2012–2013, the Flemish waste organization OVAM commissioned the development of a hands-on toolkit for the thematic integration of Ecodesign in HE (Verhulst and Van Doorsselaer 2015). Other projects regarding HESD emerged at the level of single HEIs. The first project explicitly focusing on HESD, ‘Duurzame Ontwikkeling en Hoger Onderwijs’ (DOHO, 2005–2008), was funded at the Leuven University College (now University Colleges Leuven-Limburg). It focused on the development of a practical implementation model for SD in HE.
The project resulted in the first Flemish book on the topic of sustainable higher education (Lambrechts, Van den Haute, and Vanhoren 2009). Other HEIs also undertook initiatives to integrate sustainability within their education, research, outreach, and campus operations, e.g. by drafting visions and mission statements, applying sustainability assessment tools, organizing conferences and internal professional development initiatives (Rymenams and Lambrechts 2014).

HE in Flanders is characterized by its extensive attention towards competences. Also regarding competences for SD, several initiatives have been undertaken in the past, often influenced by initiatives outside Flanders (Lambrechts, Verhulst, and Rymenams 2017). Several HEIs showed specific interest in the competence model developed by Roorda, known as RESFIA + D (in Dutch: VESTIA + D), which stands for Responsibility, Emotional intelligence, Systems orientation, Future orientation, personal Interest, Action + Disciplinary competences. This model was developed in the Netherlands, within the framework of two handbooks on SD (Roorda 2010). Due to its availability in Dutch, the RESFIA + D model received considerable attention in Flanders. As a result, it was used in at least two Flemish HEIs to assess the current state of integration of sustainability competences in business management study programs (Lambrechts et al. 2013), and study programs in teacher training, health care and technology (Lambrechts, Mulà, and Van den Haute 2010). The influence from the Netherlands becomes clear in the Flemish debate on competences for SD. This may be ascribed to the shared language, which facilitates the exchange of information and the application of instruments and models in the local educational context, but also to the fact that other competence models were not yet available in that period (with the exception of De Haan’s ‘Gestaltungskompetenz’). As more sets and models of competences for SD appeared in later years, these were also explored in the Flemish context, with specific focus on Rieckmann (2012) and Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011).

5. Results and discussion

The theoretical framework outlined in Dewey’s writings on democracy and education allows us to analyze and interpret the current HESD field in Flanders, where it can be positioned in the spectrum of approaches to HESD on the one hand, and how it could further be developed according theoretical insights on the other. Section 5.1. provides a Deweyan perspective on the Flemish HESD debate. Section 5.2. highlights the importance of (personal) initiative and adaptability, necessary to be able to lead meaningful lives and to foster improvement in a democracy. Section 5.3. pinpoints the need to frame such initiative and adaptability approaches in a framework of values and virtues.

5.1. A Deweyan perspective on HESD in Flanders

This section deals with the Flemish case from a Deweyan perspective. Three publications can be identified as relevant landmarks in Flanders. First, the EMS Manual for HEIs (Tratsaert et al. 2007). Second, the reference framework ‘Sustainable Higher Education. Understanding and moving forward’ (Waas et al. 2012). Third, the ‘Guidelines SD as a compass in drafting learning outcomes’ (Ecocampus 2014).

The early attempts to establish HESD in Flanders are clearly oriented towards ‘greening the campus’ approaches of HESD. The EMS manual focused on campus operations, with limited attention towards educational aspects. This could be interpreted as a weakness of the instrument. However, references towards both systematic change and stakeholder involvement in this process should be credited in this first phase of Ecocampus as well. The manual states that: ‘Ecocampus is a first steppingstone to take up and put into practice the philosophy of sustainable development in higher education from the perspective of environmental care’ (Tratsaert et al. 2007, 15). In this context the manual refers both to the Brundtland definition of SD (1987) and the UN Decade of ESD. Referring to the Deweyan perspective, it should be noted that, however limited in many ways, this approach deserves its merits because of its proclamation of the idea to develop campus as good examples for the direction of societal change towards sustainability. Dewey was a strong proponent of schools as change agents,
exhibiting democratic ideals. HESD initiatives focusing on campus operations could thus be interlinked with broader participatory organizational and educational change processes.

The reference framework ‘Sustainable Higher Education. Understanding and moving forward’ is broader in scope than the EMS manual. The reference framework is clearly normative in nature and explores critical dimensions of HESD: education, research, campus operations, and change processes (Waas et al. 2012). This could be interpreted as a next phase in the process of developing HESD in Flanders. From a Deweyan perspective, it frames the what, why and how questions of HESD into the broader societal context, thereby referring to aspects of change, complexity and uncertainty. Furthermore, this initiative could be labelled as what Jickling and Wals (2008) would call a more transmissive approach to HESD, in which the goals to strive for are predetermined (e.g. SD) and the process is prescribed (e.g. competences). However, the publication also touches upon differences in perspectives, e.g. regarding sustainability in science and research.

In the guidelines ‘SD as a compass in drafting learning outcomes’, first steps of a shift towards a transformative discourse can be detected. The guidelines present different competences for SD, and frame them in the broader context of relativism (Wals 2010a), transformative learning (Wals 2010b) and citizenship education (Lawy and Biesta 2010). The main competence model used in this publication is the one developed by Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011). The competences for SD are interpreted as a way to prepare students for complex and uncertain problems in society, in which SD could be a guiding principle, and not a static end goal. From a Deweyan perspective, interpreting SD as a guiding principle rather than a predetermined end goal, and thereby reorienting the competence concept in a transformative context, contributes to the ultimate aim of democracy and the role of education in it. Dewey stressed the need to enable citizens to actively, creatively, and critically contribute to social improvement in society. This is clearly connected to the transformative and participatory interpretation of HESD.

5.2. Initiative and adaptability

The three main Ecocampus publications refer to ‘wicked problems’, pointing towards the complexity and uncertainty of sustainability issues. Here we see that the Flemish discourse is aligning the international debate as reflected in Wiek, Withycombe, and Redman (2011) and Rieckmann (2012). Sustainability competences are interpreted from a normative perspective, in which sustainability is seen as an end goal or guiding principle. It has not (yet) moved towards the next step in this reasoning, i.e. that the notion of sustainability itself might be contested as a goal to strive for, as we might not know what sustainability will look like in the future. This calls for a different interpretation of HESD and competences for SD, which we might clarify by interpreting Dewey’s philosophy. Dewey claimed that part of the democratic ideal was to enable citizens to deal with changes. Contemporary sustainability competences focusing on ‘ambiguity and frustration tolerance’ (Rieckmann 2012) could be framed within this Deweyan perspective.

For Dewey, the aim of education is to prepare citizens to lead meaningful lives in the group to which they belong, and to improve democratic processes. Today, the context of sustainability and wicked problems is an added dimension to the democratic processes as envisioned by Dewey, and the question remains whether education prepares for a meaningful life and improvement in such a context. In his writings, Dewey stressed the importance of the context of learning, experience and the active role of the learner. He rejected the dualistic divide between knowledge and practice. Both academic knowledge and practical experience reinforce each other. In such a setting, it might be questioned how then competences for SD should be fostered within a current educational context which merely focuses on a transmissive approach (Wals 2010a) and is influenced by neoliberal market discourse (Kopnina and Cherniak 2016).

Dewey’s claim, i.e. the importance of education in preparing citizens to be adaptive in a changing society, to prevent them to be overwhelmed and under control of external activities of others, is nowadays as relevant as it was in 1916, certainly in a sustainability context. Citizens feel overwhelmed
by global wicked problems, on which they seem to have no influence. In a societal context in light of sustainability, the question is whether our education indeed provides the freeing individual capacity directed to societal improvement, as Dewey foresees. The answer is complex. On the one hand, within a social constructivist context, the competence concept is seen as a logical way to integrate sustainability, however, the operationalization of competences remains too instrumental and often oriented towards economic aims. On the other hand, in the context of ESE and HESD, much attention has been paid towards awareness raising for global and cosmopolitan sustainability issues (e.g. Sund and Öhman 2014). Dewey interprets education as a vehicle for individual self-realisation. Through this process, schools become a chief agent for social change (Herrick 1996). Although Dewey did not orient on sustainability or environmental issues explicitly, his focus on societal challenges and occurring changes provides the same lines of reasoning to deal with complex and uncertain issues.

Dewey criticized reductionism in his days: reductionism of economics towards the bottom line and efficiency, and reductionism in education towards skills in line with economic demands inspired by such efficiency measures. HE today is characterized by such efficiency and financial measures, as well as growing attention towards industrial demands for instrumental skills. Dewey’s warning for the aim of education as to perpetuate the present order (Dewey 1922), in a context of modern economic slavery (Dewey 1916), is also relevant in the current educational agenda influenced by neoliberalism. The Deweyan perspective reminds us to be aware of overly instrumental and economic interpretations of curricula, competences and learning outcomes.

Yet current discourses in philosophy of education tend to focus on a rather pessimistic stance in which global capitalism has led to eliminate any Deweyan-inspired education (Kitcher 2009). Nussbaum (2009) warns that education today is in crisis, characterized by the absence of critical reflection, the bondage to examinations, and the economic demands for specialized training in science and technology (Nussbaum 2009). Thus the HESD field might dive into inquiry based and research based topics (a first exploration is made in Lambrechts and Van Petegem 2016), and especially the role of the arts and humanities in this process (Nussbaum 2010; Sherren 2008). The (normative) competence approach needs framing in a transformative context of democratic citizenship. A key question to be focused upon here is then whether students are being prepared to be adaptable, rather than whether they have acquired certain competences. Such approach could enable the HESD field to surpass instrumental and authorative approaches.

5.3. Values and virtues

The Flemish case shows a gradual incorporation and awareness towards the contradiction between the normativity of the concept of SD and the relativistic stance of pluralistic interpretations. Within a context of wicked problems, SD is often regarded as a normative framework to guide a transition process in society. Also in the context of education, sustainability is often interpreted as being the goal to strive for, articulated in the concept of ESD. Many authors point towards the fact that sustainability is too unpredictable to be applied in such a normative manner in education (e.g. Jickling and Wals 2008; Van Poeck, Goeminne, and Vandenabeele 2016; Wals 2010a). Such approaches might lead to paternalism and indoctrination on the one hand, and relativism on the other. However, the urgency of wicked problems does not allow for relativism, and the unpredictability of it does not allow paternalistic and indoctrination approaches.

Dewey’s thoughts on values and virtues can provide guidance on this issue. SD is a normative concept, it provides guiding principles on how to live in a way that does not compromise the intergenerational and intragenerational abilities to fulfil needs. It could also be connected with the Aristotelian notion of ‘the good life,’ or doing what is the right thing to do in a context characterized by complexity and uncertainty. According to Dewey, being virtuous is not a fixed position, but differs according to time and circumstances. For an individual to act virtuously entails the manifestation of certain virtues, but not others, depending on the specific circumstances: ‘Chastity, kindness, honesty, patriotism, modesty, toleration, bravery, etc., cannot be given a fixed meaning, because each expresses an interest in
objects and institutions which are changing . . . . No two communities conceive the objects to which these qualities attach in quite identical ways’ (Dewey 1960, 112–113, cited in Rice 1996).

Citizens participate in community activities and share meaning through this. As such, common interests in society provide social control mechanism. Such mechanisms are inevitable, they are present in society, whether you think they are needed or wanted, or not. It is important to become aware of such mechanisms, and the way how they lead society in a certain direction, to such an extent that a lack of direction and control has no intrinsic meaning (Mougan 2013). Dewey critiques the idea of legislation directed towards particular kinds of character: ‘Until we know the conditions which have helped form the characters we approve and disapprove, our efforts to create the one and do away with the other will be blind and halting. (…) The moral problem is that of modifying the factors which now influence future results. To change the working character or will of another we have to alter objective conditions which enter into his habits.’ (Dewey 1988, 18, cited in Rice 1996). Mougan (2013) compares this Deweyan notion of control to Sunstein’s perspective: ‘Once you understand that some forms of organizational decisions are inevitable, that a type of paternalism cannot be avoided, and that the alternatives to paternalism are not attractive, we can abandon the less interesting question of whether to be paternalistic or not, and turn to the more constructive question of how to choose among the options to influence the choices.’ (Sunstein and Thaler, 2003, 1159, cited in Mougan 2013). In his notion of ‘libertarian paternalism,’ Sunstein stresses the importance of choice of the individual.

The general ESD discourse is often focusing on the values and attitudes that need to be changed in order to foster sustainable societies (Sherren 2008). As such, values are integrated in educational settings in a normative manner. However, teaching about values imposed on external grounds is exactly the type of moral education Dewey criticized: the didactically approach of teaching what other people think about virtues, without connection to the values and virtues of the students themselves, or the capacities to reflect accordingly. In Dewey’s conception of education as preparation for active and meaningful participation in social life, all education could be interpreted as moral education, instead of treating the subject in a separate course (Rice 1996). HESD could engage in the Deweyan conception of values and virtues, and thereby build upon the current contributions in the broader ESE field. Sund and Öhman (2014) call to interpret universal values as part of the educational process, rather than part of the educational goals (Sund and Öhman 2014, 650). Garrison et al. call for ‘other than modern’ approaches to incorporate values in a meaningful way in education, as a way to contribute to a meaning-making process shared by learner and educator, instead of educators dictating values (Garrison, Östman, and Håkansson 2015). Furthermore, the current attention towards virtues, and especially the approach in which normative competence and action competence are framed within a virtuous competence oriented towards sustainability as provided by Blok, Gremmen, and Wesselink (2015), provides a relevant outlook for further developments in the field. The virtuous competence enables one to take the normativity and urgency of wicked problems into account, and puts them in a personal perspective of doing the right thing in a certain situation, without being too prescriptive or paternalistic. This renewed attention towards the Aristotelian perspective on virtues enhances the theoretical framing of the field of HESD.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

The educational field in Flanders could be described as a melting pot, in which ‘new’ and progressive theoretical insights are slowly and partly introduced into ‘old’ and conservative settings. From a philosophical perspective, this was especially the case with Dewey’s legacy, that only got introduced partially and marginally in Flanders (De Coster et al. 2005). The educational melting pot results in a rich diversity of approaches and viewpoints, however we also see the pitfalls of this specific situation. This is especially the case for the integration of competences, in which ‘new’ holistic interpretations are introduced into ‘old’ educational systems without proper attention towards the structural and systematic change this introduction requires (Lambrechts and Van Petegem 2016).
The case in Flanders presented a gradual evolution from a focus on environmental management on campus, followed by a normative interpretation of what HESD should look like, and a more transformative approach in light of citizenship and democratic ideals. Furthermore, the case showed considerable exchange of information between Flanders and the Netherlands, in which Dutch models and instruments were used in the Flemish context. Within the current HESD field in Flanders, attempts to move into the direction of transformative and participatory approaches are still in the first steps, in which concepts and theoretical frameworks are being explored (e.g. Van Poeck, Goeminne, and Vandenabeele 2016). The introduction and application of new insights can be seen as a tradition in the Flemish melting pot of educational approaches, combining these with old conservative systems, which are hard to change. Unfortunately, systematic change is exactly what is needed when it comes to HESD, and it appears to be very difficult to foster this change.

In order to frame HESD in a philosophical context, this paper has used a limited number of Dewey's writings. Dewey has written a lot more on the topic of education, and these works could further be analyzed in the light of contemporary ESE issues. His focus on experience and education is but one of them. Furthermore, the philosophical thoughts of Dewey could be compared with the Flemish discourse in educational research, in which attention has been paid towards Bruno Lattour's matters of concern (Van Poeck, Goeminne, and Vandenabeele 2016). A comparative analysis between both thinkers with focus on politics has already been made in the Netherlands (Dijstelbloem 2007). Studies on Dewey's philosophy of education have received much more attention in the Netherlands, so it might be worthwhile to exchange insights on the topic, with specific focus on the relation between education and (a democratic) society in light of sustainability.

The philosophical framing of the field has resulted in a better theoretical grounding, and offers further steps to develop the field. The writings of John Dewey provide a theoretical framework on the role of education in democracy, with a focus on initiative and adaptability on the one hand, and values and virtues on the other. Introducing the Deweyan notions of initiative and adaptability enables to surpass the level of normative approaches, while the postmodern notion of the Aristotelian virtues perspective (Blok, Gremmen, and Wesselink 2015) enables to combine the urgency of sustainability issues with the personal perspective of doing the right thing. As such, re-introducing the Aristotelian perspective is a response to Sund and Lysgaard's call to frame ESE research in (educational) philosophy (Sund and Lysgaard 2013).

The philosophical framing also leads to other emerging questions, to be further analyzed. Current practices in competence based (higher) education start from an instrumental approach (whether or not influenced by neoliberal market discourse). As a result, values and virtues are left out because they simply do not fit into the instrumental approach of operationalizing and assessing competences. HEI stakeholders thus need to critically think about the question how to foster ways of learning oriented towards adaptability, initiative, values and virtues in such a context? This leads to another question: if we recommend to avoid a normative interpretation of HESD, how do we frame this in the current reality of HE under the influence of economic efficiency thinking, managerial approaches and neoliberal thinking? If, through education, we provide all conditions for a person to act virtuously, will this be a prerequisite towards a good and flourishing life in a neoliberal market driven society?

In a sense, and despite being criticized by contemporary philosophers for being too naïve and romantic, Dewey's writings appear as relevant today as they were 100 years ago, and he is a visionary of educational theory and philosophy. Reconnecting to his educational philosophy is challenging and much needed, with specific attention towards past, present and future challenges for democracy and citizenship in society, especially related to ESE studies.

Notes

1. In the literature, HESD is also referred to as 'Sustainable Higher Education' (SHE). In this paper, we use the term HESD.
2. Although praised and invited in many countries worldwide, the influence of Dewey in Belgium and Flanders was rather limited in the past. A short reception study on Dewey in Belgium, pointed towards the partly adoption and
adaption of his work within the pedagogical melting pot in this region (De Coster et al. 2005). This contrasts to
the situation in the Netherlands, where Dewey’s life was studied by a number of academics in the first part of
the Twentieth century and some of his texts were translated into Dutch (e.g. de Boer 1929; Van Schalkwijk (1920)). These
early works and translations of Dewey’s work were known in Belgium as well, however their reception was marginal
(De Coster et al. 2005). Recently, renewed attention and appreciation for Dewey has led to a number of studies and
publications in the Netherlands (Berding 2011), a trend which is anticipated in Flanders and Belgium as well.

3. This statement about the role of science should be seen in the light of the historical context, in which sciences
were criticized for their role in the Second World War.

4. The Flemish Ecocampus Project is not related to the UK based EcoCampus environmental management system and
award scheme for higher education. More information on the Flemish Ecocampus Project can be found here: http://
eccampus.lne.be/. Information about the UK EcoCampus initiative can be found here: www.ecocampus.co.uk

5. Authors’ own translation. Original text in Dutch: ’ECOCAMPUS vormt alvast de opstap om vanuit milieu zorg de
gehele filosofie van duurzame ontwikkeling in het hoger onderwijs op te nemen en toe te passen’.

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