

Sustainability & Internationalisation Agendas in the University: How can they support each other?

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Introduction

This report provides a brief overview of some of our work in the Zennström Climate Change Leadership Initiative exploring the relationship between internationalisation and sustainability agendas in the contemporary university. It reports on a short programme of desk research by the team and a workshop bringing together university leadership, students, faculty and administrative staff. It identifies key tensions, possibilities, and routes towards achieving more sustainable internationalisation strategies in universities. The report has been compiled rapidly to respond to current debates and is intended as the basis for wider discussion. We are keen to hear from colleagues elsewhere to help develop these ideas further.

Context : Defining Sustainability & Internationalisation

Higher Education Institutions in Sweden are expected by law to ‘support a sustainable development which includes that current and future generations are guaranteed a healthy and good environment, economic and social welfare and justice’ⁱ. In Sweden, as elsewhere in the world, many universities have also more recently declared a ‘[climate emergency](#)’ⁱⁱ. At the same time, Swedish universities are being encouraged to internationalise their activities in order to ‘improve the quality of higher education and research’ⁱⁱⁱ and many governments and university leaders are looking towards internationalisation as a means to secure student and research income and international prestige.

These two agendas have increasingly been seen as potential sites of tension, in particular in relation to goals related to mitigating climate change. Notably, the growing [movement of flying less in academia](#)^{iv} draws attention to emissions related to mobility in academia and encourages academics to question the travel habits and habitual forms of staff and student mobility that are usually seen as important for internationalisation.

As Ilieva, Beck and Waterstone argue

‘If we apply the commonsense rules of environmental sustainability and energy consumption to international education, by every definition international education is unsustainable in terms of the academic mobility (and energy consumption) it promotes. And if [...] internationalisation is largely adopted as a measure to support the economic sustainability of the institution, we are left with a very limited notion of sustainability and a rather gloomy picture of internationalisation’^v.

In this initiative at Uppsala University, however, the aim was to broaden our understanding of the underlying drivers for both internationalisation and sustainability, tensions between them, potential sites of complementarity, and the possibility of developing a broad vision of sustainable internationalisation.

To do so, we start by returning to the overarching definition of sustainability from the Brundtland Report: *'sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'*^{vi}. There are, however, a number of other definitions that enrich this concept. For example, Foster (2002)^{vii} characterises sustainability as the following:

- *'A process of making the emergent future ecologically sound and humanly habitable as it emerges through the continuous responsive learning which is the human species' most characteristic endowment.'*
- *'A social learning process of improving the human condition.'*
- *'A process which can be continued indefinitely without undermining itself.'*^{viii}

Ilieva, Beck and Waterstone *'use the term 'sustainability' [...] to denote possibilities for complex holistic interconnections and relations between students, teachers and curriculum within which power relations are recognized and difference valued'*.^{ix}

From these perspectives, sustainability may also be considered a social learning process, in addition to addressing ecological and social justice issues. These definitions have implications for practice, as they require HEIs to consider sustainability not only in their physically manifested activities (buildings, waste management, procurement, food, travel, etc.), but also in their approaches to research and teaching.

In the European context, internationalisation is defined as *'the intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension in the purpose, functions and delivery of post-secondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society'*^x. In the academic literature, the range of activities that fall under the internationalisation agenda is diverse: *movements of students and staff; partnership building for collaboration, prestige and capacity building; internationalising curriculum (including overseas campuses and the exporting of credentialing); including more global perspectives, promoting global citizenship, and working for international and sustainable development.*^{xi}

These different internationalisations also have different, sometimes competing, drivers. The economic model of internationalisation focuses on a university's competitive edge, where knowledge is seen as an economic good. On the other hand, the social transformative model works towards cross-cultural understanding, seeing encounters between different forms of knowledge as a social good.^{xii}

Finally, internationalisation can be understood, as it commonly is, as something that 'happens abroad', with the focus on mobility of staff and students and cross border exchanges, but internationalisation may also happen at home. Internationalisation at home focuses on the curriculum, learning from diversity in the staff and student body and in and with the local community.^{xiii}

While sustainability and internationalisation are both terms that have gained traction in universities, therefore, they are terms that are subject to critique as well as capable of concealing diverse and sometimes competing interests. The purpose of our work in this project was to make sense of the values and practices that emerge with the use of these terms, and to explore how and whether they might be reconciled. Further reading and references unpacking these respective terms are available at the end of this document.

Inspirations and examples

Using these broader definitions of internationalisation and sustainability, we conducted a rapid desk-survey to identify inspirations and examples that might constitute gestures towards sustainable internationalisation.

There are a growing number of examples of innovation in the area of academic **mobility**, where individual academics and groups are looking to find new ways to meet. For example: Anthropologists gathered across the globe for the [Displacements 2018 conference](#) which hosted and streamed over one hundred prerecorded multimedia presentations. At this event '[p]articipants were invited to watch these on their own or to gather with others to take in the conference experience collectively at one of dozens of nodes around the world. The conference thus unfolded as a distributed happening; people were invited to participate wherever they were'^{xiv}. The [We Don't Have Time conference](#) was the first virtual climate conference. There are also examples of [hybrid conferences](#) using virtualisation tools such as holograms, as at Imperial College London. Holograms have been [used in the classroom](#), to beam in lecturers from across the globe and effectively combining the online and face-to-face elements of meeting. Examples of classrooms linking through video conferencing are also increasing, Uppsala's own Archeology Department has been developing pedagogy around video conference teaching between staff and students on Campus Uppsala and the island Campus Gotland.

It is not only technological innovation driving examples around mobility, but also initiatives aimed at changing academic culture. As part of travelling to a conference, the [University of Bergen organized a train conference](#) for participants making the seven-hour train journey from Oslo. The rental of a whole train car meant that participants engaged in a series of talks, presentations, creative workshops, and networking, using the travel as part of the conference. Furthermore, many universities are developing new travel policies – e.g. [Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies](#), [Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research](#), and Bergen's [Centre for Climate and Energy Transformation](#). These policies try to decrease emissions related to travelling but also encourage reflection on when travel is necessary, thereby influencing academic travel culture. Underpinning many of these developments is the recognition that [academic air travel has limited influence on professional success](#), a recognition that offers the potential to reform promotion policies to better reflect values of sustainable internationalisation rather than airmiles.

Concerning curriculum, the development of [decolonisation of curriculum agendas](#) provide an important new arena for thinking about sustainability and internationalisation. These agendas are beginning to build teaching and learning practices that engage with more diverse and often marginalised forms of knowledge and practice. Pedagogy and research within the Education for Sustainable Development field also offers examples where academics and students are involved in rethinking learning processes as a practice that is co-defined and where matters of concern are defined together. With this shift in didactic arrangements, students and the local community also play an important role in deciding what questions and topics to focus on in their education. This has implications for how universities engage with surrounding communities. The UK research Programme [Connected Communities](#) and the related [Common Cause Project](#) provides over 300 examples of collaborative research with diverse partners and communities, and in so doing, begins to provide indications of how internationalisation at home - understood as engagement with difference - might be combined with robust research-based educational agendas. One example of this is the [Green and Black Ambassadors project](#) which addressed exclusion of Black and Minority Ethnic communities in Bristol's environmental sustainability efforts.

There are many examples of practice that we have not picked up in this brief summary and we invite colleagues from other universities or organisations who have examples and ideas to share to get in touch, with a view to creating a more publicly accessible record of what different universities are doing.

Reinventing Sustainable Internationalisation at Uppsala

The risk of using broad definitions of both sustainability and internationalisation, and in particular, of working with the Sustainable Development Goals as a definition of sustainability, is that it is easy for university leaders pick and choose from goals and activities to give the impression of a commitment to sustainability. This risks complacency and continuation of business-as-usual. With this in mind, our aim in Uppsala was to become more focused, in a way that allows us to make real progress or at least to identify what we do not know and where we might need to both innovate and conduct research. This led to a workshop comprising three activities: 1. Focusing and defining internationalisation and sustainability 2. Visioning 3. Back-casting.

On October 28 the Zennström CCL Initiative ran a workshop with support from the UU environmental manager, the head of the UU Internationalisation council, and the head of the UU Sustainability council. Twenty participants from across the university joined the workshop, including representatives of the student union and the [climate students](#) (a growing student movement in Sweden urging universities to decrease emissions in line with evidence-based carbon budgets), members of the [Internationalisation](#), Sustainability, and Collaboration councils (advisory boards which advise the Vice-Chancellor and are the deliberating bodies for University-wide international, sustainability, and collaboration issues), and researchers from peace and conflict, literature, energy transitions, and archeology.

Defining Sustainability

In small groups, participants started by defining sustainability. A number of different definitions emerged – for example, a more precise focus on what the practice excluded: *‘NOT the abuse and misuse of resources, neglecting consideration of the future, planetary boundaries and other beings today’*; as well as *‘openness to understand each other, different others, connection, complexity’* and *‘questioning how we do things today that we have normalised’*. In the plenary discussion, a broad definition of Sustainability was offered:

Sustainability entails:

- *Good use of natural resources*
- *Care for the future in the short term and long term*
- *Understanding of our role in complex systems*
- *Respect for difference*
- *Fairness*
- *Recognition of the ecological underpinnings of social and economic sustainability*

Defining Internationalisation

In the discussions, participants variously defined internationalisation as *‘understanding new ways of thinking and new people’*, *‘attracting top scientists’*, *‘career-building’*, *‘removing barriers between people and understanding’*, *‘sharing knowledge’*, *‘learning to listen to others’*, *‘cultural exchange’*, *‘diversify, integrate, cross and intercultural understandings’* *‘developing genuine interest in others’*

opinions and views, *'localisation'* *'common good should be the goal'*, and *'transcontextual knowledge'*. In the plenary discussion that followed the group work, a broad framing of internationalisation was offered:

Internationalisation entails:

- *Understanding across difference*
- *Understanding across cultures*
- *Taking place at home and abroad*
- *Recognising interdependence*
- *Diversifying partners*
- *Creating economic security for the university*

Across both discussions, shared definitions were formed eventually; there were several moments of discord where participants found it hard to agree on what they did want, but easier to agree on what they did not want. This seems to reflect the latent tensions in the idea of sustainable internationalisation.

Notwithstanding this, the two collective framings the whole group produced (and which still evidence some of the complexity and tensions within these concepts) define internationalisation and sustainability in a way that is much richer than their too frequent reduction to either international reputation and economic benefit, or to the reduction of carbon emissions. Together they provide a vision for sustainable internationalisation as oriented towards:

*developing the capacity of the university
to exchange knowledge and ideas across difference
in ways that do not misuse or harm natural resources*

Possibility thinking

From this foundation, a future agenda for sustainable internationalisation in the university can begin to be envisaged.

First, participants engaged in a visioning activity to try to think creatively and freely about the future direction of sustainable internationalisation. Groups addressed different focus areas of the internationalisation agendas of universities: *staff and student mobility, curriculum, graduate skills, research partnerships and networks, science diplomacy, and building reputation*. Groups were invited to position themselves in 2030, when Uppsala would be hosting its 10th 'Sustainable Internationalisation Summit' in which they would be giving a presentation for an audience of international university leaders and NGOs as well as local city leaders. The participants' task was to present, in their ideal world, what Uppsala University would be presenting in 2030 in their designated area and why it would be world-leading in terms of sustainable internationalisation.

A rich array of ideas originated using this format. For example, the group focusing on **curriculum** presented their 2030 world-leading **train-classroom initiative**:

The train is a classroom, both literally and metaphorically. We are envisioning moving the classroom on trains, so you can pick up and drop people off along the way, you can visit new places, other universities and go to lectures there, lectures can be on the train, and also by being

on the classroom train together you get to know each other, so you get this exchange onboard as well. We are thinking about the classroom as a site of cultural exchange. [...] The metaphorical part is also flexible curriculum tracks, you don't have to have "I'm in the business school" "I'm a geography major" and sustainability, we assume, is fundamental to education. We see the curriculum as an ecosystem where it's all interconnected so that also reaches outwards.

The group focusing on **building reputation** made a case for **new league tables adopted by the UN with accounting mechanisms that have shifted from measuring quantity to measuring quality**. This means *'looking at some of the softer values that are more difficult to measure: quality of integration between university and society, between students at the university, and the university becoming what it was truly intended to be as a governmental reference point'*. From their perspective, *'sustainable development is only maintaining the status quo. We want to take this a step even further into a transformative, decolonised evaluation scheme.'*

In the **science diplomacy** arena, quantum physics had led to revolutionary thinking around what reality actually is since how we perceived science had evolved. In this **new quantum university**, *'everything "bad-free" was used [...]bureaucracy changed and quantum mechanics laid the ground for new social structures as well as new values.'* This proposition was described as being more 'rational' than current bureaucratic organising structures.

Graduate attributes in 2030 were obtained in part by *'a virtual element within each HE degree to connect to other people across the world without having to travel there, so it's a sort of trans-contextual knowledge creation in practice where we compare notes across the globe.'* A further attribute of this space counters the video meeting culture today which *'lack[s] spontaneous coffee breaks because they have arranged start and end times, to counter that we have created a virtual coffee room in every department at the university where you can connect to colleagues across the world and you can just pop in at a certain time and other people might be on the other side and you can have chat with them informally.'*

Finally, a Utopian Scientific Project around **international academic university collaboration** focused on virtual relations that are based on peace, goodwill, and other shared values. This virtual reality space connects all partners, who are limited in number, through regular, remote contact and slow, high quality face to face meetings when travel is required.

Routes to action

The purpose for this visioning activity is to open up the possibility space and to examine what the real desires might be for universities to evolve towards sustainable internationalisation. The backcasting exercise grounds these discussions and identifies what the first steps might be towards achieving these aspirations.

Several overlapping themes, present below, emerged from the backcasting exercise across different groups. While these ideas were proposed for the specific conditions in Uppsala, they could be applied elsewhere with contextual modifications.

Permission & Enabling Innovation

- **Permission and support to test new ideas for sustainable internationalisation in research.** The workshop identified the importance of support for researchers who want to innovate with the forms and nature of their research to ensure that it is both international and sustainable. There is a need for expert advice in terms of assessing and experimenting with travel choices, arranging online meetings and conferences.
- **Need for piloting and experimental spaces.** Where there is no best practice, experiments are required. These require investment as well as institutional support and leadership. More than support, there is a need for building sites or lighthouse projects, for ideas and testing of new ways of doing sustainable, international research and teaching, as well as administrative and financial support to move trial projects forward. This experimental space is currently lacking in the university – similarly, there are few mechanisms for rapid sharing of insights across the university. There is a clear role for Internationalisation and Sustainability councils to support innovation and knowledge sharing across the university.

Clarifying Values

- **Quality over quantity.** The challenge of Sustainable Internationalisation requires reflection on the nature and purpose of all forms of mobility. To this end, the group proposed reviewing existing international partnerships and mobility against the criteria of quality rather than quantity. Participants in such networks should be asking: what international partnerships matter, for what reasons? How do they justify the impact on climate and environment?
- **Testing unexamined assumptions.** Student and staff mobility and its actual impact on the quality of education and research is presently under-researched. The precise nature of the forms of mobility that generate meaningful intellectual and educational breakthroughs for both academics and students is unknown. Universities, as research-based institutions, need to examine these issues. Without this, claims that international mobility necessarily improves quality should be recognised as an article of faith rather than evidence.
- **Measuring what matters.** The group determined that a new means of evaluating and promoting university work was required that moved beyond the limited metrics of current international league tables. To make progress in this area would involve a process of identifying values that are congruent with sustainable internationalisation and developing metrics to assess these. Such a process requires staff-student partnerships, evaluation expertise and partnership with other universities to establish an agreement across universities in Sweden about 'valuing what matters'. It would also require the trust and buy in of universities in the underpinning methodology. This might form the basis for collaboration and discussion with the university's existing university partnerships and networks.

Implementing Sustainable Mobility

- **Actively supporting technological innovation.** Basic video conferencing functionality needs to be reliable and normalised for university staff. More innovative tools also need to be explored, including avatar, augmented and virtual reality technology. The group also reframed the question of technological innovation in virtual meeting practices not only as an institutional responsibility, but as a research area urgently in need of development. There is a role for the university's engineers and computer scientists in developing virtual presence and engagement as part of their research agenda.
- **Establish a climate fund** to compensate for situations when travel is essential. The fund would support sustainability projects that are run by students and staff collaboratively. This fund

should be built on science-based knowledge for the kinds of action we should be taking regarding emissions, but also should equally be about building community and social justice.

Rethinking the Classroom

- **Recognise the classroom as a site of cultural exchange.** Support and encourage exchange through inclusive practices that take place between students but also between students and staff. Recognise sustainability as foundational to the curriculum across the university, where the curriculum is understood as an interconnected ecosystem that also reaches beyond our university walls. Enable students to participate in international exchanges as part of normal day to day activities, facilitated by virtual collaboration.
- **Supporting meaningful internationalisation in the student body.** If internationalisation of the student body can be justified, it must offer more than economic benefit for the university. At present, however, it is far from clear that internationalisation of the student body supports enriched student and peer learning without support for either home or international students. More effort is required to build collaboration and encounter between students from different backgrounds. The student unions can do good work here in connecting Swedish students and international students.
- **Learning in and through slow travel.** Land based travel has the potential to play a large role in not only staff and student exchanges across physical geographical spaces, but also have the potential to act themselves as a site for learning. Taking the train as default for all student and staff exchanges achieves a number of goals: focusing attention on whether the exchange is necessary and useful, and creating an opportunity for the train, as a form of slow travel, to also be used as a learning experience. A shift to trains by default encourages critical reflection on the value of exchanges, recognises that mutual learning takes time, as well as notably decreasing the environmental impacts of student exchanges.

Building partnerships

- **Finding allies and partners.** Uppsala is not alone in facing these challenges, and many staff are interested in exploring new approaches. There is a need to build communities within the university for moving initiatives forward and finding partners from other universities who want to move in similar directions. Which of our international partners, but also institutions that we have not previously partnered with, share similar visions and values to move forward in this field?

Next steps

This report will be presented to the Chairs of the Internationalisation and Sustainability Committees at Uppsala University in late 2019, and will be discussed with the leaders of the University's developing sustainability policy. Our additional hope, however, is that it prompts discussion in other universities and, where possible, the sharing of new practices and experiments that are taking place around the world.

Contact us

Readers interested in the area of sustainability and internationalisation who want to share relevant work or initiatives, or comment on the report, should contact us on susanna.barrineau@ccl.uu.se – or via twitter at @ccluppsala.

Useful Further Reading

Burian, Isabell (2018). *Academic flying of Swedish sustainability academics and a pathway to organisational change*. In *Master Thesis Series in Environmental Studies and Sustainability Science* [MESM02](#) 20181 [LUCSUS \(Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies\)](#).

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ⁱⁱ <https://climateemergencydeclaration.org>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.government.se/48fc30/contentassets/4df6aeabd2bd4f5dbbf69210f786e133/internationalisationagenda.pdf>

^{iv} <https://academicflyingblog.wordpress.com>

^v Ilieva, Roumiana, Beck, Kumari and Waterstone, Bonnie (2014), Towards sustainable internationalisation of higher education, *Higher Education*, 68, p.876.

^{vi} <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/5987our-common-future.pdf>

^{vii} Foster, John (2002), Sustainability, Higher Education and the Learning Society, *Environmental Education Research*, 8(1), 35-41.

^{viii} As cited by Vare, P. & Scott, W. (2007), Learning for a change: exploring the relationship between education and sustainable development, *Journal for Education for Sustainable Development*, 1(2), 191-198.

^{ix} Ilieva et al., 2014, p.880.

^x De Wit, Hans, Hunter, Fiona, Howard, Laura, and Egron-Polak, Eva (2015), Internationalisation of Higher Education Study, p.29. Accessed on:

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- ^{xii} Trahar, Sheila, Green, Wendy, de Wit, Hans, and Whitsed, Craig (2016), The internationalisation of higher education, *In: Jennifer M. Case and Jeroen Huisman, eds., Researching Higher Education: International Perspectives on Theory, Policy, and Practice*, London: Routledge 2016.
- ^{xiii} Trahar et al., 2016.
- ^{xiv} <https://culanth.org/about/about-the-society/announcements/reflections-on-displace18>