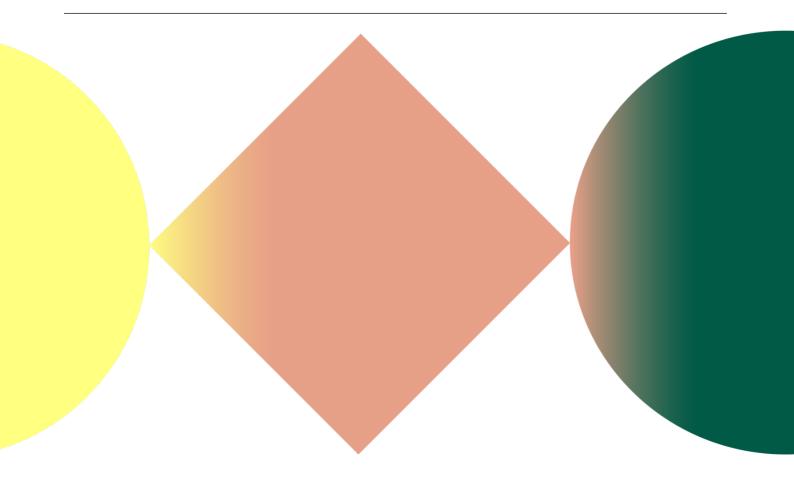# Governance and leadership in sustainability

Sustainability Workshop Learnings
Una Europa General Assembly, Universiteit Leiden (8 June 2023)

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Introduction

Sustainable development and climate protection belong to the biggest global challenges of this century and will remain focal points of academic research, education and University life in the decades to come. It is our vision to systematically develop our communities, opportunities, spaces, and projects to meet these challenges. This is reflected by our commitment to consider sustainability and climate protection as a transversal theme in Una Europa's overall collaboration and actions

The Una Europa's members share the responsibility for the special role of university not only in teaching and research, but also actively shaping the global discourse and pioneering examples and innovation processes for transformational change in addressing challenges to sustainability. We relate sustainability to the meeting of the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[3], adopted by the United Nations in 2015, and their implementation in our own area of responsibility. In the Una Europa [Sustainability and Climate Protection Strategy](#) (2021), governance is highlighted as one of the courses of actions leading to improve our sustainability management and engagement. Alliance activities in this area encompass the following issues:

- *Establishing a mission statement as well as an implementation and reporting process, which outlines our attitude and objectives in the field of sustainable development and sets a net zero climate goal in line with climate science.*
- *Developing a strong management structure and a whole-institution approach to sustainability interlinking our efforts in research, teaching, operations, and outreach activities.*
- *Acting as a 'living lab' for society by fostering innovation and new technologies as well as driving new mindsets and behaviours.*
- *Creating paths to grow sustainability leadership amongst our staff and students and exploring means of cross-institutional mutual learning and support.*

Governance needs to be understood as *the act or process of governing or overseeing the control and direction of something* (Merriam-Webster) is critical for success of embedding the idea of sustainability within university structures.

This document provides the reflection's summary and horizontal guidelines for the future actions of alliance's member and other university which would like to develop sustainability approach in their activity.

The task force sustainability as working body of the transversal theme Sustainability and Climate Protection is writing these documents as one action among others to explore how a sustainable development on institutional level can be supported by a University Alliance and how sustainability reporting at Alliance-level can be tackled

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[3] 3 https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals_en (24.04.2023)

Lessons learned from university practices

To enable sustainable governance, it is necessary to adopt an organisation-wide perspective. Only with a whole-institution approach and embedding sustainability in all governance elements (learning and teaching, research and innovation, campus, processes/daily operations), is it possible to transform organisational culture in a sustainable manner/ fashion. It is crucial to ensure the active involvement and co-ownership of all university stakeholders, thus, there is a need to:

- **Take responsibility at top leadership levels** (e.g., vice rector for sustainability) → engage decision-makers in the process of change and create mandate for sustainability actions, highlight the support and commitment of top management.
- **Involve multiple levels from the very beginning** → overcome barriers between top-down administration and bottom-up initiative teams.
- **Team up with academics, students, and staff on an equal footing** → join forces in participation and co-creation.
- **Set up strategic units** (sustainability offices, coordinating units) and **give them clear responsibilities and ownership of the initiative teams** → change the structure and overcome coordination challenges.
- **Recruit and engage "sustainability champions" in different units** → raise awareness and engagement.

Recommendations: How to accelerate policies into actions?

The following recommendations are based on the debates around given tasks and free discussion during the first day of the peer-to-peer workshop during the Una Europa General Assembly at Universiteit Leiden on 8 June 2023. Two presentations also provided input: by Thomas Esterman the Director Governance, Funding and Public Policy Development, European University Association (EUA) on Sustainability governance at universities, and by Riina Koivuranta and Henna Puustinen from University of Helsinki on Sustainability & Responsibility Plan 2022 – 2024 at University of Helsinki.

Recommendations are formulated in four areas related to key barriers to Sustainability Development implementation in Higher Education institutions:

- dispersed uncoordinated actions & organizational, structural barriers to supporting and legitimizing sustainability initiatives.
- lack of stable, sufficient resources and infrastructure.
- low competences of academic and administrative staff around sustainability and leadership.
- the need to build consensus around actions & communicate their grounds and effects.

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Whole-Institution Approach

Strategy & Implementation Plan

Money & Non-financial **Resources**

Evidence, Expertise & **Competences**

Communication & Agreement

As such, concrete actions could be shared to learn how to deal with these identified key issues.

◆ Strategy with clear targets and implementation plan

- o Focus on strategy rather than on individual actions – embed short-term actions in key milestones for long term vision. Try to avoid risk of dead ends of ad hoc actions and act based on bit-by-bit strategy i.e., choose your battles and right timing.

- o Include all elements of the strategy and its implementation:

  - realistic vision & mission and feasible ambition level (target year, scope level, areas of focus/exclusion),

  - clear plan of implementation (decision criteria) and people responsible for individual tasks and key decisions,

  - evaluation process, including monitoring strategy and measuring methodology (targets and indicators) .

- o Embed sustainability into other institutional strategies (e.g., educational, innovation policies) and decision criteria for funding and planning activities in all institutional areas.
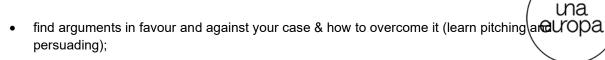

◆ Resources, not only money

- o Provide sustainable and stable financing and investments, but also create additional specific funding incentives (e.g., link funding with the ranking criteria or create sustainability criteria targeted funding). Reduce interruption of implementation process to minimum.

- o Link units (and people), share asset and services. Avoid duplication of tasks and waste of resources.

- o Delegate staff (and their time) for sustainability tasks. Make people responsible for SDGs' actions.

- o Promote informal leaders and give them a mandate for their actions as well as resources and infrastructure suitable for their needs.

- o Modify your assets for sustainable transformations and plan how to replace and improve non-sustainable assets or process.

◆ Informed decisions based on evidence, expertise & sustainability competences

- o Diagnose the current state, barriers, and opportunities for sustainability development at the university, then evaluate and target the gaps between current & the planned/needed state. Act in well researched conditions.

- o Create advisory boards with broad institutional involvement and broad scope of expertise which can provide overviews and guidelines. Use participatory approach to share and use knowledge from different fields and see the problem from different perspectives.

- o Develop sustainability competences among staff & stimulate and highlight research initiatives in sustainability area. Accumulate knowledge and competences in the organization.

- o Participate sustainability alliances with other universities. Exchange good practices, share perspectives.

◆ Communication for common understanding and agreement

- o Make sustainability visible, intelligible, needed and justified:

  - raise awareness of the problems (explain, don't take things for granted);

- find arguments in favour and against your case & how to overcome it (learn pitching and persuading);

- choose wisely your target audience and be aware of their perspective (know "which rope to pull" & speak their language).

o <u>Build positive, relatable image of SD via transparent communication</u>:

- be specific and very clear about the motives / grounds, justify why sustainability is important for different stakeholders;

- show other benefits before the sustainability (not only saving, but creating added value e.g., new money or resources, increased wellbeing);

- share success stories, best solutions, and ways to overcome problems.

o <u>Create synergy in communication</u>:

- link the debate about ecological sustainability with discussions about sustainability in other areas (social, cultural, health/wellbeing, equity diversity, inclusion matters etc.);

- be part of the wider public discussion as an ally of sustainable development.