



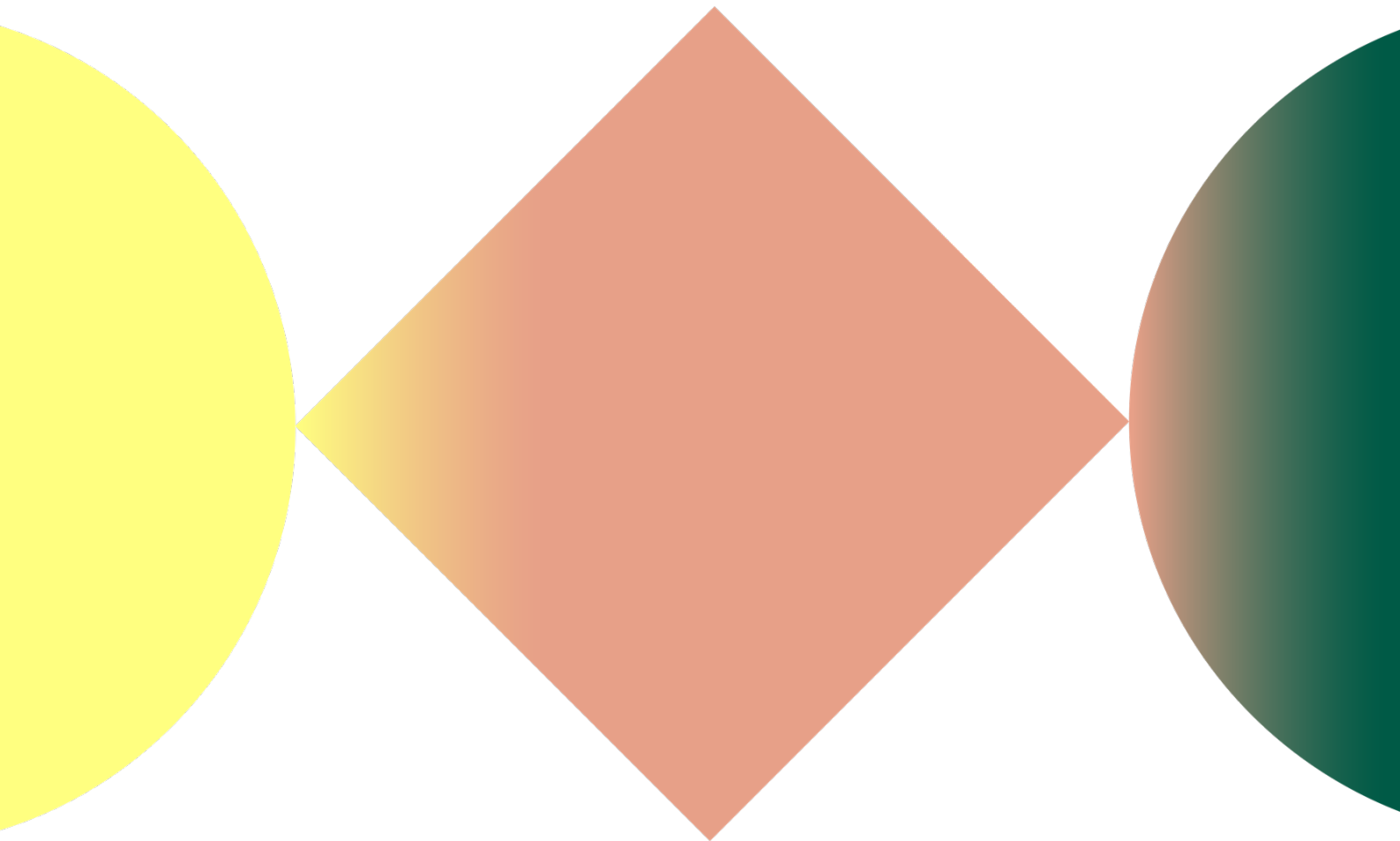
# Community engagement at universities

Sustainability Workshop Learnings

Una Europa General Assembly, Universiteit Leiden (9 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. Herewith, we strongly participate in the academic discourse on the global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>1</sup>, adopted by the United Nations in 2015, and in their implementation in our own area of responsibility.

Una Europa is committed to supporting and improving community engagement related to sustainability at the campuses of all partner universities. Community engagement (CE) is defined in the [Una Europa Sustainability and Climate Protection Strategy](#) (2021) as:

*Engaging our university community – including students, staff and other stakeholders – in dialogues and actions on sustainability, thereby strengthening their awareness and commitment both in professional and personal life.*

The impact of CE can be significant, both at the individual and organisational level, or the social and the structural level. It can mutually stimulate bottom-up and top-down initiatives on sustainability, paving the way for: (i) broad support and mobilisation within the whole university community of students, staff and academics, and even beyond our university walls, (ii) concrete and university-wide collaborative actions and (iii) increased knowledge, commitment and behavioural change towards the subject. However, the practice at our individual campuses shows that there are many challenges related to CE.

The goal of this document is to foster inter-institutional learning and innovation by presenting the outcomes of peer-to-peer exchange among experts in the field. The document serves as a basis for all stakeholders at universities, especially decision-makers, to create the framework for sustainable development and therefore future universities. The task force for sustainability as a working body of the transversal theme Sustainability and Climate Protection is writing these documents as one action among others to explore how sustainable development at the individual institutional level can be supported by a University Alliance and how sustainability reporting at Alliance-level can be tackled.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals\\_en](https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/international-strategies/sustainable-development-goals_en) (24.04.2023)

# Lessons learned from university practices

To ensure real and durable CE impact, some important lessons can be drawn from existing practices at our universities.

- **Scaling up and professionalising bottom-up initiatives with top-down support:** Many CE sustainability initiatives are initiated or run by a specific, often small group of volunteers who want to bring about change and make their immediate working environment and/or the university at large more sustainable. Small and/or voluntary initiatives or pilots can be valuable as a first step. However, at some point they need to be scaled up and integrated within the existing structure(s) and time schedules, and properly funded to ensure continuation and impact.
- **Connecting people:** CE has an important social dimension since it brings people (students and staff) together, also across disciplines and entities, and mobilizes them towards collaborative action. Keeping the threshold for participation low (e.g. administrative burden) and promoting network opportunities are important drivers to increase CE.
- **Visibility and dissemination of initiatives:** To get and keep people engaged, it is important to value, appreciate and acknowledge their work by communicating about it and sharing good practices and lessons learned within and beyond the whole university community.

## Recommendations to support CE at our universities

Based on the discussions during the peer-to-peer workshop on this topic during the [Una Europa General Assembly at Universiteit Leiden](#) (9 June 2023) and building further on the lessons learned, the following recommendations can be identified.

- Provide the right and sufficient incentives and resources
- Create opportunities for people to connect across disciplines, entities, campuses and even across institutions
- Value (new) CE sustainability initiatives and spread the word within and outside the university

The recommendations are explained in more detail on the following pages.

In general, it is important to emphasize the role of decision-makers in realizing these recommendations. Support can be given by providing (long-term) resources, creating space and legitimization through mission statements, policies and other HEI-specific tools.

# Whole-Institution Approach

**Incentives &  
Resources**

**Opportunities to connect  
inter- and transdisciplinary**

**Appreciation &  
Communication**

## ◆ Provide the right and sufficient incentives and resources

Even when CE sustainability initiatives are initiated and driven by a group of enthusiasts, they need sufficient (financial) resources, support, follow-up and transfer of knowledge in order to actually implement them at the organizational level of the university. Moreover, by institutionalising CE within certain policy frameworks, more people will be encouraged to commit themselves to sustainability initiatives.

To achieve this, the following aspects at the level of staff and students were identified.

### CE for and by staff

- Make sure to install a **core team of staff facilitators** from different entities across campuses with the **time and mandate** to act as 'the glue of these initiatives', to monitor and evaluate them and to facilitate transfer of knowledge and continuation (or scaling up) of the projects.
- Provide a clear **workspace** where all people involved in certain CE initiatives can come together, and a designated **budget** for materials, etc.
- Install a system of **seed-funding** for (new) CE sustainability initiatives or add CE as a criterium for (additional) funding.
- At the level of HR policy: include CE as a **criterium in the evaluation cycle** of staff members.

### CE for and by students

- **Involve students in the core decision-making** processes of CE initiatives and give them the opportunity or platform to link their own sustainability initiatives to already existing ones. Treat their actions seriously and dare to address political sensitive issues.
- Provide **means and facilities** by appointing a member of staff as a **point of contact, mentor/coach or coordinator**.
- Create possibilities to **include CE into their student and academic life**, e.g. by integrating opportunities for CE sustainability projects into their curricula.
- Provide **(other) incentives** so that students are prepared to commit themselves for longer than one year.

## ◆ Create opportunities for people to connect across disciplines, entities, campuses and even across institutions

A sustainability initiative becomes richer when people with different backgrounds and perspectives get involved. Collaboration also enhances broad support and understanding of different viewpoints and certain policy measures.

### CE for and by staff

- **Encourage exchange** between researchers, sustainability, technical and other staff members and university policymakers to facilitate real collaboration on certain sustainability projects.
- **Ensure a low threshold to participate** in already existing initiatives at the university, such as Ecoteams, especially for staff members who volunteer in these initiatives. For example, by avoiding or diminishing the administrative burden.
- Facilitate and actively promote **peer-learning between institutions**, also at the level of technical services.

### CE for and by students

- Guide students to **find their way within the university structures and get connected** to staff-led or other student-led sustainability initiatives.

- Stimulate **main actors and existing structures who focus on student engagement** within various entities across university to **join forces and exchange** on new and existing initiatives, and integrate an element of sustainability in them.

#### ◆ Value (new) CE initiatives and spread the word within and outside the university

Highlighting existing and new CE sustainability initiatives gives a boost to and a platform for the work of those involved, and inspires and attracts others to become engaged. The aim should be to also to reach people who are not yet committed and open to be involved, and to moderate controversial discussions that are needed following the dynamic path of sustainable development. Furthermore, working on ‘pet projects’ in line with personal interests can also lead to a higher identification with the workplace and increase general performance in daily work tasks. Additionally, institutions that allow engaged staff to pursue their interests in the workplace are more likely to attract those highly qualified workers and tend to keep them thanks to their identification with the institution.

##### CE for and by staff

- Introduce a **variety of ways to highlight CE sustainability initiatives** and inspire other people to get involved, e.g. organize a contest between buildings, departments or campuses or combine already existing activities (e.g. university wide sports day) with certain sustainability actions (e.g. campus cleaning action).
- Express and share appreciation of CE sustainability initiatives and the people behind these initiatives and highlight how and to what extent certain initiatives have been **integrated within university policy**.
- **Identify real-world sustainability problems** for and by the university community and formulate it as a challenge to come up with an innovative solution (e.g. creation of certain apps), in a collaboration between students, academics and technical staff.

##### CE for and by students

- Involve and get support from the communication services in student-led sustainability initiatives and use **familiar communication channels** to students with relatable messages.
- Engage **student ‘sustainability ambassadors’** to spread the word and reach other students, e.g. let them inform their peers on the benefits of their engagement.
- Provide a **platform for students to present on-going initiatives to other/new students** and get them involved, i.e. focus on scaling up and building on experience instead of always starting new projects