



Summary 13th of June 2022

University Forum

Sustainability

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At the last meeting of the academic year, the members discussed sustainability. For most members, this was also the first meeting of their term in the University Forum. The theme was introduced by two guest speakers: Ewout Doorman, sustainability policy officer, and Lucy Upton, General Manager of the UvA Green Office.

Ewout Doorman

The UvA currently already has a sustainability policy: the so-called 'white paper'. In his presentation, Ewout introduced those present with the most important objectives formulated there. The UvA is committed to a 25% reduction in the ecological footprint within five years, stimulating a sustainability community, paying attention to sustainability in education, training sustainability pioneers and making a contribution to the climate with our research. Ewout emphasized that these plans are not the final destination. Fundamental questions remain, such as whether we want to do well compared to other universities or whether we want to go further and do what it takes to become fully sustainable. In addition, there is also the question of whether we should not take a more critical look at the content of our education and research and how this has contributed in the past and how this still affects structures that hinder sustainability, such as the fossil industry.

Lucy Upton

Lucy told the members of the University Forum about the UvA Green Office, an organization that is run by students and that contributes to the implementation of the sustainability goals and activates students to get started with sustainability. A sustainability community is one of the goals of the white paper, but in practice it proves difficult for students to achieve results. This is largely due to the high turnover. Students are only active for a short time, which means there is no continuity and the wheel has to be reinvented time and again. How do we ensure that we keep students engaged and how can the UvA ensure more continuity? These are questions that need answers if we want an effective student sustainability community.

Statements

After the introduction by the guest speakers, the members and other attendees started working on the four provoking statements below in break-out sessions. You can read the results of these group discussions in this report.

1

The UvA must do everything it can to align its environmental impact with the planet's ecological capacity and the Paris climate goals. Even if this means, for example, that there will be less money for research and education, that buildings can no longer be cooled or heated and that furniture and ICT equipment can no longer be replaced.

2

Scientists must stop flying to attend conferences, for example, and the UvA must draw up a plan to completely ban such flights within five years.

3

The UvA must switch to fully vegan catering or take measures (for example price increases) to ensure that the consumption of animal proteins is in line with the carrying capacity of the planet. For example, consider a reduction of 80%. We must also do this if this means that students and employees go outside the canteen to get their food and drinks.

4

The development and dissemination of knowledge is not only the solution to but also the cause of the climate problem. The UvA must therefore analyze whether there are programs and research groups/projects that are a major part of the climate problem or are exacerbating this problem. The UvA must then try to reform or discontinue these degree programs and research groups or projects.

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Everyone agrees that the UvA should become more sustainable. But how sustainable exactly? Being 'truly' sustainable means that your climate impact is in line with the carrying capacity of the planet. We are not there yet at the moment. If we look at the measures that the UvA is currently taking, it is striking that there are hardly any measures that actually cut into the organization, while it is likely that this is necessary to achieve complete sustainability. In the discussion in this break-out group, a number of different considerations were discussed that may play a role here. There is concern, for example, that measures that affect the quality of the campus by making the use of space and heating more sustainable will lead to fewer students and staff coming to the UvA. Restricting air travel and reducing the influx of new students would reduce emissions from UvA-related travel movements, but these students and employees would then probably go to another university where sustainability is less important.

These are just examples of a series of possible sustainability measures that could affect the attractiveness of the UvA as a place to study and work. There is a trade-off that is painful to make. Do you want to 'correct' your climate impact as quickly as possible and thereby possibly chase students and employees away, or is it smarter to take it easy and keep those students and employees on board as much as possible? When making that choice, it is important to think carefully about the term. Cutting hard in the organization to reduce emissions may be sensible in the short term, but may hinder sustainability in the longer term because it could repel students and staff who would otherwise be able to internalize sustainability values within the UvA or even contribute to sustainable innovations. Break-out group 4 spoke extensively about sustainability and scientific innovations.

The discussion is in line with the classic debate between degrowth and green growth, about which opinions are also divided within the UvA. Are we going to cut to reduce emissions, or continue to grow, but in a more responsible and green way? More radical sustainability would be easier if competition with other universities was less intense, which argues for a greater role for coordinating bodies, such as the national government in particular.

Unfortunately, The Hague proves time and again not ambitious enough, so we will really have to take up that responsibility ourselves. By collaborating extensively with other universities, we may be able to reduce competition risks without being dependent on The Hague, but it remains the case that due to the lack of coordination from above, the degrowth scenario would be more complicated than green growth. In addition, departments within the UvA are relatively autonomous and strict measures could therefore also be complicated to implement.

Ideally, we will find a way to combine growth with sustainability. This means that the measures we take are not so much aimed at cutting and strict rules, but at encouraging the right choices. As far as air travel is concerned, this would mean, for example, that we switch to a 'no, unless...' model, in which flying is no longer the norm, but it is not excluded either. If we keep our focus on the long term, emissions in the present may be justified if they contribute to scientific development for sustainability in the future.

Opponents of this strategy say that until now we have learned from sustainability at the UvA that placing responsibility with the individual does not yield sufficient results. We will therefore have to act more actively if we really take sustainability seriously, even if there is no support for it.

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The flight behavior of UvA employees is one of the most discussed topics in the sustainability debate. It is clear that flying is bad for the climate, but does that mean that we should stop it completely? Break-out group 2 has considered this question. One of the main reasons for flying is to attend scientific conferences. These conferences are extremely important for maintaining networks with colleagues in the relevant field, for exchanging research and, especially for starting academics, an important step in their career.

Science knows no borders; we will have to maintain contact with foreign colleagues in any case. The question is whether this is only possible through physical conferences that require you to fly. One congress is not the same as the other, and there are definitely meetings that could possibly also be online. Fortunately, we are already seeing a development in which it is increasingly accepted to say 'no' to a long journey for, for example, a single lecture. In that regard, we can absolutely learn from our experiences in the pandemic and do digitally what can be done digitally. Unfortunately, that doesn't apply to everything. Congresses are certainly valuable because of the informal interactions, which are difficult to establish in a digital context. In addition, there are disciplines that are so international in nature that intensive international collaboration is a must. This sometimes applies not only to our own researchers, but also, for example, to researchers who do not have a safe environment in their home country for the exchange of ideas and who are therefore dependent on international networks for the performance of their work. Such cooperation and the exchange of ideas is better in physical meeting.

Flying should therefore remain possible for destinations that cannot be reached in any other way and where physical presence is clearly of added value. Destinations that are also easily accessible by train can be excluded. The UvA must then release extra money to reimburse the often higher travel costs of the sustainable alternative and in the case of air travel, in any case, opt for CO2 compensation.

Limiting air travel is one way to become more climate-friendly. It wouldn't be good to stare blindly at it. What someone finds important differs enormously per person, so let's try to create space for sustainability in different ways, according to the need. For example, some departments could fly more because this is necessary in their field of research, but can compensate for this by making other areas more sustainable.

Behind the discussion about flying is a bigger question: does the UvA want to be a world university or a Dutch university? This question precedes a wide range of discussions within the UvA, about internationalization, but also sustainability debates about air travel. A question on which the last word has not yet been said.

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Another much-discussed area where sustainability would be necessary is UvA catering. Animal proteins, and meat in particular, have a major impact on the climate. Wouldn't it be better if we switch completely to vegan meals? Following on from the previous two groups, there is a dilemma here. Should we proceed expeditiously and make 'wrong' choices impossible, with the risk that staff and students will still buy non-sustainable meals outside the UvA? Or should we proceed more subtly by adjusting the choice architecture of the catering in such a way that people make better choices themselves without us directly limiting their options? The University Forum clearly preferred the latter. In this way, we avoid undermining support for sustainability and we offer UvA students the opportunity to improve sustainability in their own way. After all, food is not equally important to everyone. For some it is much easier to eat vegan than for others.

The two most important ways to positively improve the choice architecture are price nudging, whereby we make less sustainable choices more expensive, and information, where we communicate more clearly which choices are sustainable and which are not. An additional advantage of working on that information is that we can immediately make allergy information and information related to nutrition values clearer, something that is currently often lacking to the frustration of students and employees who need it. Although there is a website with that information, it is hardly known and it would be much easier if this information was available in the cafeteria itself when students and staff make their choices.

In order for this approach to work, it is of course important that the basic offer is sufficiently diverse to offer room at all to make such responsible choices. That means an expansion of the vegetarian and vegan range.

Unfortunately, it turns out to be difficult to actively manage the caterer's policy, because we are dealing with an external private company that also appears unwilling to enter into discussions with students and employees about their needs. The UvA should commit itself to more control over catering so that we can work towards the goals discussed and preferably also do something about the high prices at the same time.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the catering discussion is often based on certain assumptions about the wishes and consumption behavior of students and staff, without having the data to support those assumptions. It would benefit these discussions if we had more insight into this.

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The consequences of scientific research are difficult to predict, which makes it difficult to distinguish between problematic and unproblematic research projects. So what we should not do is exclude certain projects from above, at most in cases where the application is clearly problematic (in the dual use cases for example). With regard to climate, we would be better off taking measures aimed at stimulating 'good' research and discouraging harmful research. There was consensus that we should do something about it. Doing nothing is also choosing sides to maintain the problematic status quo. Scientific research can extend the lifespan of a system that we should really get rid of as soon as possible, such as the fossil industry. How do we prevent UvA research from playing such a role in hindering sustainability? Parties that provide research funding such as private partners or organizations such as NWO have a great deal of influence on the research agenda, but that does not mean that we cannot steer. We should make it clear that we take a critical look at the sustainability aspect with every application and take this into account when deciding whether we will start working on it. If we show that we, as the UvA, want to serve the planet, this could eventually lead to a change in the research agenda.

A point of discussion was the question of whether we should stop departments that are currently 'problematic' or whether we should focus on positive change. Once again the discussion returns between degrowth and green growth.

In addition to research, the role of education was also discussed. With our academic education, we train the students who will later fulfill important roles in society. We must ensure that we have a positive impact on society and that we do not reproduce the ideas and values that have caused the climate problem. We need to change the status quo rather than reproduce it. That

is not happening enough at the moment, as it appears. In many courses there is little or no attention for your social responsibility as an academically trained individual. That responsibility goes beyond sustainability alone. Setting up a course within every study program focused on these themes would be a good step, but we must watch out for 'tokenism': a single sustainability elective should not become an excuse to ignore the theme further.

This touches on an underlying question about the concrete implementation of measures for greater sustainability in education and research. Are we betting on rewarding or punishing? Autonomy of departments or central management? From psychology we know that drawing a line, for example a minimum number of credits on sustainability, can also have negative effects. People start to focus on that limit and moderate themselves in that way, while otherwise they might have been able and willing to do more than that guideline. That's something to watch out for.

We cannot introduce sustainability and academic responsibility everywhere in one fell swoop. It will be a process of continuous critical (self) reflection and adjustment. What we should do quickly in the short term is to set those processes in motion. The minimum that departments can do is start asking themselves explicitly whether they are doing enough. That is the start of the conversation and a first step that has not yet been taken in many places within the UvA.



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