

Wolfgramm Rachel, Dr
University of Auckland,
12 Grafton Road, Auckland, New Zealand
Ph: 649 3737599 Fax: 649 3737477
Email: r.wolfgramm@auckland.ac.nz

Creating leadership in transition to sustainability societies: Reflections from the Universitas 21 Sustainability Project

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Abstract

In order to ensure 21st century relevance and progression, universities worldwide are developing innovative approaches to research and education for sustainability. Whilst it is an agenda that has been underway for many decades, in recent years, due to the escalation of sustainability related concerns worldwide, universities are repositioning themselves in renewed efforts to create leadership in transition to sustainable societies. As “living laboratories”, they are spearheading a shift in principled driven intellectual *and* solutions based activities that exemplify their role as critic and conscience of society. (Cortese, Second Nature). Further to this, in seeking to advance lateral synergies across vertical specialisations, universities are proactively leading transdisciplinary research in private/public/community partnerships. Projects involve the convergence of a range of specialisations. Such initiatives take current sustainability related challenges and create suitable institutional mechanisms that facilitate collaborations across disciplinary boundaries and well beyond the confines of universities. The overarching goal is to act as change agents by collaborating to develop new knowledge designed to facilitate better understanding of the issues at hand whilst simultaneously enhancing the capacity to generate sustainable solutions. These initiatives in universities around the world indicate a genuine desire to meet and address sustainability challenges of the 21st century. They highlight the role universities are playing in creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies.

Introduction

Sustainability imperatives include issues such as a growing human population estimated to climb to nine billion by the year 2050 and concomitant concerns such as resource depletion and regeneration, climate change, global water shortages, costs of desalination, accelerating food production, agglomeration and urban stress, hyper consumerism, human and environmental costs of war and terrorism, waste management, and the search for sustainable and renewable energy (UNEP, 2005, WWF, 2008, World Bank, 2008). Therefore, the term “Sustainability” provokes a myriad of responses from individuals, businesses, community groups, academics, politicians and supranational organisations around the globe. Irrespective of the vast range of responses to the issues, Meadows, Meadows, and Randers (1992), define a sustainable society as “one that can persist over generations, one that is far-seeing enough, flexible enough, and wise enough not to undermine either its physical or its social systems of support”.

Given this definition, in a comprehensive sense, sustainability incorporates economic, social, cultural and environmental factors which include: enhancing and advancing aspirations for a desired better future, principled leadership, the need for innovative, systemic and institutional change, moral and ethical development and social justice. Transformative processes in business enterprise, accelerating research, development, action and investments in green technology are important foci. Minimising physical degradation, fostering regeneration programmes and stabilising the amount of raw material extracted from the Earth are critical. Supporting communities of purpose and practice focused on improving, safe guarding and protecting the natural environment and the life of other species are also captured in this thematic approach.

In terms of the science of sustainability, in critical areas such as climate change, food and water security, coastal erosion, eco-migration and eco-infrastructure in urban development, scientific based research informs a range of sustainability related impact reports, legislation and policy development at international, national, regional and community levels. The general consensus is that delivering sustainable futures requires transformative actions now. The call for transdisciplinary sustainability research and education with scale and reach is increasing in international academic communities.

The leadership challenge for universities

This paper is informed by several key questions. They include: what is the role of universities in creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies, how can university led research and education better respond to the aspirations of current and future generations, how can universities place higher value on the opportunities of the present as we transition to sustainable societies? how can universities further enhance and advance sustainable related research and education through new and innovative institutional processes? where can universities look to benchmark success in sustainable leadership and build on these? how is success in sustainability driven leadership being determined and measured and how important is it to develop critical perspectives of sustainability(ism)?

A primary role of universities is that of the critic and conscience of society. However, the institution itself has evolved over time and is now embedded in a society dominated by an overriding economic paradigm. This phenomenon is not that unusual when taking into considering condensed global industrialism and its consequences over the last 200 years. In terms of the apparatus of global industrialism, contemporary institutions that cut across all spectrums of society have developed over time to support an agenda dominated by economic growth. Universities are by no means immune to this, and in fact, have grown exponentially as the demand for new knowledge in a knowledge economy has driven significant growth in the “education” sector. For example, according to Cortese (2010), in the United States alone, this sector is valued at 350 billion dollars.

Alongside the economic driven paradigm and the demand for more intense specialisations in the accumulation of new and contemporary knowledge, modern universities have developed both conceptually and structurally to reflect this (Chubin, 1976, Becher & Trowler, 1989). In fact, Willinsky of Stanford University argues that higher education is viewed more and more as “a knowledge factory capable of spawning cutting-edge ideas, high tech corridors, spin-off companies and jobs”. Given that, new and transformative sustainability related research competes with a dominant agenda that is driven by economic imperatives. Universities are now highly risk averse and have embedded cultures that favour the traditionalism associated with academic tribes and territories.

In addition to these challenges, a range of institutional based norms have emerged. For example, academic reward systems favour traditional systems for hiring, tenure and promotion which are controlled by departments. In this context, there is often little reward or recognition for teaching or research outside one's disciplinary area. Distinct institutional cultures which require higher degrees of collaboration may have different concepts of 'proof' or 'precision'. For example, the culture of a mathematics department, differs from a biology department or that of a management department. Programme evaluation in academic institutions relies on traditional evaluation mechanisms to benchmark programmes and allocate resources. When emerging fields are left out of assessments, they may not receive funding. Departmental procedures differ across departments and faculties which may have different methods for allocating resources, organising research, authoring papers, controlling space and allocating facilities and criteria for recruitment, which may impede or fail to reward new and transformative transdisciplinarity. Added to this, performance based research funding and similar forms of appraisal are determined based on outputs that are orientated by historical endeavours and those impacts which are immediate and ultimately generate tangible and reportable outputs. As a consequence, limited resources including staff, time and funding that is designed and devoted to transdisciplinary initiatives that are present and future focussed needs to be outstanding in order to attract funding and centralised funding. The requisite time required to develop such initiatives is intense. In addition, the start up time for transdisciplinary projects which includes arranging staff, equipment and resourcing for a collaborative project, may take longer than within-department projects, thus reducing the time for research and reporting results unless specifically dedicated to such research. International publishing avenues are often unsympathetic towards transdisciplinary research. However, the higher A rated journals are based on intensity of specialist knowledge and growth and contributions within these silos as opposed to transdisciplinarity. New and emergent outlets for transdisciplinarity publishing are often undervalued and dismissed as ineffectual to growing and accumulating specialised knowledge.

In spite of these challenges, new initiatives are emerging within universities that signal a genuine desire to move beyond these socially constructed boundaries. Pursuit and commitment that resonates with being a critic and conscience of society is re-emerging with renewed intensity in universities. The following section of this paper contributes insights to this based on a current project entitled "Implementing the Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability to advance research and teaching excellence for Sustainability". I outline the project and then offer a framework that may contribute to developing better understandings of how universities are creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies.

The project

The catalyst for this project was the signing of the Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability in 2009 by 21 partner universities around the world. The preamble states;

"The quest to realise a more sustainable way of life on Earth is increasingly becoming a race, not against one another, but against time. The challenge of the decline of biodiversity, of energy, food and water security, of climate change, of economic sustainability and of human health have been recognised as being among the greatest faced by the human race and the planet and we believe that the urgency of these requires unity of purpose and of leadership.

We recognise that universities have a role to play in researching solutions to such problems so as to bequeath a sustainable world to future generations and in educating future generations about this awareness and research. We recognise that member institutions are committed to engaging with issues of global significance and that working together collaboratively and cooperatively we can achieve more than is possible by working alone. We acknowledge the role that universities play in creating a new future for the dynamic world in which we live. Through research, teaching, community partnerships and demonstrable actions, universities can help advance timely solutions to ecological, societal and economic problems. Through our engagement with civil society, industry and government, we can accelerate these solutions beyond the campus itself. ” (Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability)

The [Universitas 21 Statement on Sustainability](#) commits internationally networked universities to progressing global sustainable development in five areas:

- a) Research towards sustainable futures
- b) Education for sustainability
- c) Universities as living laboratories for sustainability
- d) Enhancing citizenship and engagement
- e) Building capacity through cross network collaboration and action.

The Universitas 21 SoS agenda is both ambitious in scope and scale. Given that, in terms of translating the aspirations of the document into a workable understanding of what is needed in Universities in terms of creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies, below is an outline of the some of the overarching goals inherent in the document.

Research and learning that enhances, advances and delivers sustainable futures
Recognition of the urgent need for innovative institutional change and theory building that is holistic, connected and transformative
Research and learning that develops a better understanding of values, citizenship, legislative, policy, compliance and social equity approaches to sustainability
Research and learning that exemplifies and amplifies the role that universities are doing as ‘Living laboratories, for example, greening campuses through design and development of green buildings, energy reduction, carbon neutral campuses
Research, learning and actions that build moral, ethical understanding and address issues of social justice and socio-ecological equity
Research and learning that enables a benchmarking for success in transformative processes in business, society and politics that is beneficial for local communities and global business alike
Research and learning that links to accelerating investments in beyond the horizon technology and innovation
Research and learning that addresses the urgent need to reduce, minimise and stabilise the amount of raw material extracted from the Earth
A strong commitment to transdisciplinarity that facilitates lateral synergies and collaboration whilst ensuring vertical specialisations are not undermined – thorough consideration of systems based analysis, processes and implementation strategies
The development of innovative new research and learning methodologies and methods that build stronger links between theory, practice and the biophysical environment

Research and learning that supports actions of communities of purpose and practice that are focused on improving, safe guarding, and protecting the natural environment and the life of other species

Being open to learning from the natural world and being determined to build closer theoretical and practical links
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Research that facilitates local and global virtual dissemination
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Strategic objectives of the project

In response to the aspirations outlined in the U21 Statement of Sustainability, in August 2009, a team of staff from across the University of Auckland, applied for and received funding from the Vice-Chancellor’s strategic development fund for a project titled “Implementing the *Universitas 21 Statement on Sustainability* with a focus on advancing teaching and research excellence”.

The key strategic objectives of this project included:

- a) developing an action plan that addresses The University of Auckland’s commitments under the *U21 Statement on Sustainability*
- b) advancing the University as a relevant and progressive institution in the 21st century
- c) establishing the University as a recognised international leader in teaching and research for sustainability
- d) cultivating and building networks and connections to a broad community of interest, both locally and internationally

Prioritisation of actions

By invitation, a cross faculty steering group was established to develop the overall strategic architecture and implementation of the project. This steering group comprises junior and senior Faculty members from across the university.

1) Appointment of project co-chairs
2) Series of steering group meetings to create and confirm <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Strategic orientation of project in line with the <i>Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability</i>• Project components and realistic timelines for implementation• Development of a Terms of Reference document for the (1) steering group and (2) to inform the consensus-building workshops
3) The recruitment, briefing and management of an external facilitator, to host the series of cross-faculty and inter-disciplinary workshops within the University to foster collegiality and collaboration, and build general consensus.
4) Recruitment of Administrative Support
5) Design and development of a series of cross faculty consensus building workshops
6) Co-facilitation of three workshops which:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. raised awareness of the Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability and it's potential impact b. outlined the University's strategic positioning in terms of Sustainability Research and Teaching c. profiled current Sustainability related initiatives already in place across the University d. identified expectations of interest groups throughout the university e. facilitated a series break out sessions oriented around U21 SoS f. developed specific actions in line with the U21 SoS g. rovided feedback to the participants of the workshop series h. made progress towards creating a network of scholars committed to the actions they have developed for the University in alignment with the U21 Statement of Sustainability i. a comprehensive draft that summarises the Actions considered necessary to be undertaken by the University in order to achieve the 5 requisite goals of the U21 Statement of Sustainability
8) Series of follow-up meetings with a small steering group executive team to synthesise results from the consensus building workshops
9) First pre-symposium workshop hosted the Director, School of the Environment
10) Second pre-symposium workshop for steering group members and workshop participants to: Present "leading by example" initiatives currently underway at UoA and international strategic initiatives underway at U21 Partner Universities with a particular focus on Dr Lesley Stone's visit's to McGill, UBC and Monterray
12) Development of a comprehensive draft and programme for the "Universitas 21 International Sustainability Symposium, November, 2010 which included convening members from all faculties of the university, and inter-institutional support networks.
13) Organisation and administrative tasks with respect to the U21 Sustainability Symposium (<i>nb, Patrick McGuire and Richard Judd lead the technology team for the U21 Sustainability Symposium to enable virtual international links and delivery</i>)
14) Hosting of a one day international symposium at the University of Auckland "Universities as leaders in transition to sustainable societies. Key representatives from all faculties, the leadership Institute and Institutional Support services came together to discuss, New, emerging and transformative initiatives (including inter-disciplinary research and teaching), their perspectives of the challenges and opportunities for institutional innovation and change necessary to meet the objectives of the Universitas 21 Statement of Sustainability and strategic leadership and transformations of how their respective faculties and the university could further enhance and advance the five themes of the U21 SoS including any meta goals and objectives with scale and international reach and impact.
15) Development of a url: www.u21sustainability2010.co.nz with the intent of expanding this into an interactive cybersite
In addition to the above, the project is continuing to:
1) Consolidate engagement of a sustainability networks across the tertiary sector and within the wider community of stakeholders (supra-nationals, government, business, community and NGOs).

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| 2) Develop a document that comprises a review of the project, strategic implications and recommendations to be presented to the Vice Chancellor in regards to Implementing the U21 Statement of Sustainability to advance teaching and research excellence for Sustainability. |
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Of worthy note, in addition to this project, the University of Auckland has developed Themed Research Initiatives which cover a range of areas pertinent to addressing sustainability related challenges and are explicitly designed to advance and accelerate inter-disciplinary research. Further, the University has committed to membership of the United Nations Habitat Partnership network, a global initiative involving universities worldwide.

A framework for creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies

The introduction of this paper highlighted several key questions. They included: what is the role of universities in creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies, how **can** university led research and education better respond to the aspirations of current and future generations, how can universities place higher value on the opportunities of the present as we transition to sustainable societies? how can universities further enhance and advance sustainable related research and education through new and innovative institutional processes? where can universities look to benchmark success in sustainable leadership and build on these? how is success in sustainability driven leadership being determined and measured and how important is it to develop critical perspectives of sustainability(ism)?

In the following section of this paper, I offer a framework designed to raise the level of awareness in the pursuit of creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies. Whilst this conceptual framework does not directly answer the questions raised, I suggest it signals the need to further develop more inclusive and innovative ways of both engaging in transdisciplinary research, and creating completely new research and teaching ecologies that will inform the needs of transformation in 21st century higher education.

This conceptual framework is in its generative infancy and offers some initial insights based on involvement in the U21 Sustainability project. These insights reflect my own critical reflections as an academic with a specific interest in the social construction of institutions and institutional innovation. It also reflects a broader interest in leadership-followership dynamics and links between this and institutional transformation. The framework moves beyond the traditional positional concepts of leadership towards processual leadership and inherently argues that new forms of participatory leadership and new ecologies of engagement are necessary in creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies.

Creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies

Creating and supporting the development of new and innovative leadership paradigms that shift the dominant ideology of business towards that of society at large wherein the role of business is to support pro-social and pro-environmental behaviour on optimal benefit paths to ensure a double dividend

Recognition of the real costs of associated externalities. Creating leadership that is willing to

engage with and learn from nature's ecologies. A focus on stewardship of the environment Pricing and enforcing the consequences of negative externalities.
The role of cultural dynamics including values, beliefs, behavioural norms, symbols and artefacts that support the development of new cultures of leadership in transition to sustainable societies.
Leading through intellectual endeavours that highlight the limitations of anthropocentricity
Creating and crafting leadership that builds on inherent human and environmental creativity across a broad spectrum of activities.
Creating new forms of identity that emphasise the role of the environment in identity formation as a social construction. Highlighting the need for creative expressions of identity that signify a less anthropocentric view of the world. Signally the role of contrived status hierarchies and reorienting and recreating new forms of status signals oriented by sustainable consumption
Symbolism impacts both leader and follower dynamics. Creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies requires new forms of symbolic leadership driven and acknowledged from all spectrums of society, not just through policy and position. A highly proactive approach is necessary as passively waiting for traditional shifts in symbolic leadership is inconsistent with transformational and agented leadership
Creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies requires a new voice and language paradigm that explicitly includes that of future generations. More inclusive conversations with children and youth are imperative in new forms of knowledge creation as it is their future and the future of the home and biosphere that this transition will have the most impact upon
Ethics of leading in spaces and places that re-orient conversations towards the environmental consequences of actions. More emphasis on wisdom and less on the acquisition and accumulation of irrelevant and redundant knowledge
Critical analysis of the business/industry of leadership and whether it is appropriately oriented towards being part of the solution to deliver sustainable futures
Leading through innovation in sciences that focus on regeneration of the earth's resources and conservation of the species in the biosphere
Openness and willingness to engage in transcultural conversations and intercultural learning from different indigenous wisdom traditions
Creating a fresh new and dynamic spirit of leading that is able to overcome and move beyond institutional boundaries and that focuses on interdependence of the physical, intellectual and spiritual worlds
A legal system oriented by environmental and social consequences of actions. Compliance regimes that effectively generate higher levels of planetary citizenship. As the costs of compliance and enforcement are intense and high, policy is needed alongside other suggestions.

Conclusion

In a post industrial era, new values will shape research and learning. These values honour the present and needs of future generations and respect the planet that the human population rely upon for survival. A values shift, a new consciousness and an alignment with fresh new institutional innovations is preferable to forcibly dismantling or "decommissioning" outmoded institutions as sudden and dramatic structural change would only increase social instability. The changes that need to be made are systemic and include the need to rethink,

reframe and renew outdated and outmoded institutions. Rebirth and renewal will only arise from a commitment to change through transformative thinking and action.

Citizenship of such a scale will require a new consciousness and an individual and collective force of will in local and global communities of purpose and practice. It will require reflexive thinking and action guided by an inclusive and principled approach driven by sustainability imperatives. In order to breathe life into a new consciousness, the ideologies associated with condensed global industrialism need to give way to new transformative ways of progressing and delivering sustainable futures. For universities, the shift is significant and will require creating leadership in transition to sustainable societies that is dynamic, innovative, transformative, adaptive, flexible, committed and dedicated. The Universitas 21 Sustainment of Sustainability is but one such project that is attempting to contribute to this shift.

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