Statement on Sustainability

Sustainable development can be defined as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".[1] It is crucial to view sustainability holistically as encompassing not only a safe climate and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but all different dimensions of sustainability. This includes aspects such as ecological thinking, sustainable communities, environmental and social justice as well as sustainability mainstreaming in politics, economics, production, consumption and education.

Science clearly shows that the current way of living is not sustainable. Climate change caused by human activity, over-consumption of natural resources, mass extinction of species, lasting damages caused by pollution and persisting social injustices are well documented. We must listen to the scientific community and act with the necessary urgency to respond to the crises we are facing.

It is clear by now that the current mode of production and consumption is not sustainable; without a radical transformation process, we will continue to compromise the prospects of future generations. Because the necessary transformation needs to be science driven, education institutions play a crucial role. Young people and students make up almost half of the world's population and we have a vital role to play in driving the transformation towards a sustainable society. ESU is aware of the necessity to take responsibility, but it can not solve the problems alone. Urgent action from education institutions, corporations and policy makers on all levels is needed.

When our educational institutions, corporations and governments avoid taking action on sustainability, they are not just avoiding the issue, but are in fact making a political decision to continue unsustainable development. Globally, less than 3% of people go to university, yet 80% of societal leaders have been to a university. Our educational spaces create future leaders, yet our institutions are not ensuring that all their graduates are equipped with the knowledge and competencies needed to be

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[1] http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm

leaders for a sustainable and just future we want to see. Policymakers have the responsibility to think beyond the end of their own time in office and build a society that meets the needs of future generations. Education institutions have a responsibility to provide relevant research, communicate the results of their research to the general public free of charge and to fulfil the multiple purposes of education within society.

The Responsibility of Education Institutions

Sustainability is a core foundation of education`s public responsibility. Education institutions have an obligation to equip students with the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to empower them to work towards a more sustainable society. Therefore, sustainability should be taken into account in the quality frameworks of the Higher Education Institutions.

Sustainability is not a topic related to one field of studies but a cross-disciplinary and fundamental value that affects every discipline. Integrating sustainability into all levels of education empowers students to think critically about our impact on society. This does not necessarily mean separate courses on sustainability but rather a mainstreaming of sustainability-related learning outcomes throughout all programmes and curricula.

In many countries, education institutions are increasingly creating strategies on sustainability. Amongst the ones doing it, their purposes vary widely. ESU stresses that it is important to create the strategies, and the impact of sustainability on learning must be at the core of these strategies. Student representatives need to be included in every step of the way when designing and implementing sustainability strategies. Not only because students are an equal member of the academic community but also because the students' perspective brings added value when crafting holistic solutions.

Sustainability strategies must be aimed at generating genuine action directed towards improving the sustainability impact of the institution and something to strive towards, but should not just be a PR tool. The latter approach, referred to as "greenwashing" must be unequivocally avoided. Striving towards sustainability as an education institution is not only about implementing social responsibility policies or tokenistic initiatives. However, education institutions still need to take responsibility for their own footprint.

Many education institutions have either large endowment funds directly invested and/or have indirect investments through their pension plans. Our institutions play a

large role in funding the fossil fuel, coal and other unsustainable industries, whilst also taking funding and financial support from them. Therefore, our educational institutions

must take a lead on a working towards a just and sustainable society, by divesting from the fossil fuel industries and reinvesting in clean and sustainable portfolios, it is a decisive action with considerable impact.

Other major areas of education institutions impact on sustainability are their policies considering purchasing, heat and electricity as well as transportation and building their facilities. Avoiding unsustainable consumption, changing the source of electricity, reducing the amount of travel and change the mode of transport are important parts of reducing the emission of greenhouse gases. It is possible to operate a globally connected institution while still taking action to eliminate or at least minimize the negative impact on the climate. ESU encourages education institutions to exchange best practises and strive towards a more responsible approach within the entirety of their operations.

Arguably, the most important effect education institutions can have in their work towards sustainability, is on the minds they are educating. Education institutions must take responsibility for SDG4.7[2] referring to education for sustainable development by mainstreaming sustainability into all their educational efforts. They furthermore have a responsibility for outreach and clear science communication, that among others contributes to SDG13.3[3] which relates to climate education.

Research has an essential role in finding new solutions for environmental and social challenges. While curiosity-driven research is important, it is also crucial to reflect on how research benefits society as a whole. With academic freedom comes responsibility to continuously consider ethical aspects before funding or conducting research projects. Ethics committees should take into account not only the direct impact of research but also indirect harms on our living conditions such as accelerating climate change.

ESU firmly believes that education institutions should support students in taking sustainability initiatives. Students are at the forefront of sustainability action in multiple ways on all levels - from political organising to supporting fellow citizens in making sustainable choices. Education institutions should encourage this and form

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[2] SDG 4.7 "By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development."

[3] SDG 13.3 "Improve education, awareness raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction, and early warning"

meaningful partnerships with student and civil organisations. One example is HEIs supporting the
establishment of Green Offices by students and students' organisations.[4]

- Education Institutions have the responsibility of promoting investments aiming at reducing the ecological footprint for instance by incentivising the usage of durable and/or biodegradable materials, promoting a circular economy approach and studying ways of self-producing energy through renewable resources with the goal to achieve
- All education institutions shall make concrete action plans for reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, with a goal of climate neutrality by 2030.
- All the emissions of education institutions must be mapped and reported. For example in accordance with the GHG-protocol, including indirect emissions from Scope 3.
- If the education institutions manage assets in funds, the funds must be fossil fuel free and live up to the UN Principles for Responsible Investment and respect human rights.
- Sustainability shall be a decisive factor in ethical guidelines and procurement deals.
- The education institutions shall have strict demands of climate neutral procurements.
- Education institutions shall not make deals with oil, gas and coal companies that involves financing of petroleum and coal research that is incompatible with the commitments to reach the SDGs.

The Responsibility of Governments and Corporations

Decision makers on the subnational, national, European and global level have a responsibility in making society more sustainable through mainstreaming sustainability considerations into their decision making in all sectors. Decision makers need to ensure that students are being supported to live sustainable. The everyday climate friendly alternative should be transparent and economically accessible for students.

ESU urges governments on all levels as well as corporations to declare climate emergency as soon as possible and contribute to fulfilling the Paris Agreement and keeping the global temperature increase below 1.5 °C. We also urge governments to implement the SDGs and other UN agreements within the set-out timeframes in an inclusive manner where all stakeholders are being consulted and young people can meaningfully take part.

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[4] greenofficemovement.org

ESU calls on the EU to take the lead and be a role model in the global transition towards sustainability and to urgently reduce emissions to stay well within its equitable part of a carbon budget in accordance with the 1.5°C target.[5] Investment in research and innovation is a crucial part of solving the climate crisis and building a sustainable future. Therefore, funding for research should be increased, and sustainability should be prioritised in the Horizon Europe programme as well as other programmes funding research, development and innovation activities.

ESU encourages governments to take the following concrete actions:

- Integrate sustainability into quality assurance regulations since sustainability is a crucial aspect of education quality.[6]
- Integrate sustainability into performance contracts or other regulating mechanisms. However, they must ensure to keep a strong dialogue with education institutions and a flexible method of implementation since finding the best solutions will require bottom-up initiative.
- Allocate funding for education institutions to enable them to become more sustainable. Many education institutions are under financial pressure and will therefore need support for executing sustainability initiatives such as retrofitting buildings, increasing the amount of sustainability-focused research or performing outreach activities to fulfil SDG 13.3.
- Invest in access to further education for people in employment, including financial support enabling them to invest time in studying. This is essential for a socially just transition since many workers will need upskilling to move from unsustainable industries to more sustainable jobs.
- Invest in and promote the local, national and transnational railway network so that they become a cheaper and equally efficient method of transport as the airplane. Furthermore, along with the education institutions, it is necessary to promote sustainable and free public transport for students.

The responsibility of the media

Media and social networks have a big impact on shaping opinions of the community. New information is generated daily and it is easily distributed and shared. However, in the age of fast information sharing, fact-checking is not always done in time and scientific evidence and relevance are often not taken into account. The media has

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[5] What is a carbon budget:
https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-how-much-carbon-budget-is-left-to-limit-global-warming-to-1-5c
What does a fair part of the carbon budget mean:
https://www.carbonbrief.org/how-to-divide-up-carbon-budgets-fairly
[6] An example of good practice from the Swiss Agency of Accreditation and Quality Assurance:
https://aaq.ch/en/accreditation/institutional-accreditation/

the responsibility for the content it spreads, hence it should promote scientifically proven and relevant facts that address global needs and educate the public on the sustainability. Cooperation between media and education institutions is especially relevant on this matter. The media must refrain from spreading misinformation and in particular social media platforms need to stop the spreading of false news. Particularly in the case of paid advertisements stronger fact checking processes need to be implemented by the platforms. ESU supports further engagement of the media with education institutions to assure the proper circulation of information to the society content-wise. Only by assuring that the content is relevant, research-based and contributes to society, can the media become a true messenger of sustainability and the driving force for change in the mindset and the activity of the public.

ESU's Responsibility

Solving the climate crisis and transforming society towards social and environmental sustainability requires action on a structural and political level. However, actions are also needed from all individuals and organisations. ESU firmly believes that all stakeholders must work together to solve this challenge. ESU commits to taking the following concrete actions:

- ESU will incorporate sustainability as a crosscutting value by mainstreaming it into its strategic political priorities, plan of work and any other policies.
- ESU will advocate towards decision makers, education institutions and corporations to convince them to do their part for achieving a sustainable future. ESU will do this in collaboration with other student-led and youth-led movements in Europe and globally.
- ESU will advocate for a more sustainable Erasmus+ and other mobility programmes. More social sustainability should be ensured by widening access to full-semester physical mobility for currently underrepresented groups. Environmental sustainability should be promoted by incentivising sustainable means of transportation. The solution is not traveling less but traveling more sustainably.
- ESU will do its best to make its own travels sustainable. ESU will choose sustainable travel options when possible. In cases of external partners covering travel expenses ESU will ask for carbon compensation of flights. ESU acknowledges that carbon compensation is not a solution but it is better than doing nothing at all.
- ESU will collect good practices on sustainability and spread them among its members as well as to external partners.
- At ESU's internal events, the Executive Committee will assist the hosts with making sustainable choices to a practical extent.

● ESU will support its members in advocating towards education institutions to incorporate sustainability in their curricula.

Resources

- Global Network for Innovation - Sustainable Development Goals: Actors and Implementation:
  http://www.guninetwork.org/publication/sustainable-development-goals-actors-and-implementation-report-international-conference
- Swiss regulation for quality assurance of education:
  https://aaq.ch/en/accreditation/institutional-accreditation/
- Good practices of actions from education institutions and student organisations:
  - Good practice collection from the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change:
    https://unfccc.int/topics/education-youth/good-practices/education-and-training-good-practices
  - Sustainability activities from NUSUK:
    https://sustainability.nus.org.uk/
  - "Green impact" where students audit the sustainability of institutions:
    http://greenimpact.nus.org.uk/
  - The Green Office model from Rootability:
    http://rootability.com/green-office-model/
- About Divestment from fossil fuels:
  https://gofossilfree.org/divestment/commitments/