



JOURNAL OF THE EUROPEAN HONORS COUNCIL

Note

From 'green goals' to a broad understanding of sustainability: Honors students change the perspective of a university

Erik de Kruijff

Honors student Mechatronics Engineering, Hanze University of Applied Sciences Groningen, the Netherlands

Correspondence: e.de.kruijff@st.hanze.nl

Received: 29 January 2019, Accepted: 20 March 2019, Published: 25 April 2019

Keywords: honors students, sustainability, SDG

--

1. Sustainability journey towards the sustainable ambitions

This note is about how a group of honors students changed the perspective of their university on the issue of sustainability. In the beginning of 2017, Hanze University of Applied Sciences (UAS) Groningen, the Netherlands, published their journey towards their sustainability ambitions.

Their aims were:

0% waste by 2025

No more usage of natural gas in the buildings by 2025

Every student and every alumnus is a green ambassador by 2025

Their employees are sustainable role models for the world around them by 2025

One of the most fundamental and visual steps the university took was in setting up the "Green Ambassador" program. Students and employees who are involved in sustainable projects are able to get a Green Ambassador certificate. The vision behind this certificate is to inspire students and employees to get involved in projects related to the theme of sustainability and to put an extra spotlight on these projects. The Green Ambassador program in itself did not reach the goals the university wanted, so the university decided to set up a "brain camp," with the theme "Green Quest" which was organized by the Hanze Honors College.

A brain camp is a project set in a relatively small time-frame (usually a few weeks), where the whole group works around a theme-based question. The question we, as honors students, had to work on in the brain camp was:

“How do we get every student to be a sustainable ambassador and every employee to be a sustainable and healthy role model?”

2. An interdisciplinary group

On the 23th of November, 2017, the Green Quest kicked off and the team was introduced. The team was made up of:

Annemiek van der Hoek – School of Arts
 Olaf Booij – Psychology
 Wietske Brouwer – Mechatronics
 Steven Homsma – Industrial product design
 Erik de Kruijff – Mechatronics

Within the introduction days, we were privileged to attend workshops, had small assignments, and visited a company that works in a new sustainable building. ‘Design thinking’ was one of the workshops where we learned more about how to create an idea and about reviewing the progress within the development process. The total introduction was only three days, just to give the tools and mind-set to work with a question and to get in touch with the theme of sustainability.

3. Broadening sustainability

During the kick-off days, we talked a about sustainability and the university’s understanding of sustainability. We realized that they used terms like “Green Quest” and “Green Ambassadorship,” and the goals where focused on the impact on nature and climate (‘Green goals’). But, this is not the full definition of sustainability!

Sustainability is the ability to be sustained, supported, upheld, or confirmed.

Sustainability is not by definition intertwined with nature and/or climate. It is a term that can be used for so much more; for example, it can be used for economics, technology, and healthcare. Is this what our university wants to achieve, or do they only want to focus on climate-related goals? We had a talk with our coaches and the university, and we got the freedom to proceed with the definition of sustainability as we would see fit.

As a team, we started to brainstorm, research the different visions of sustainability, and discuss this topic. Is it enough to just focus on nature? Are there more issues in the world that need our attention?

At the end of December 2017, we concluded as a team that we would work with the vision of the United Nations (UN) of the definition of sustainability. They see sustainability in multiple segments of the world that all need focus. The UN writes about sustainability:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It encompasses more than care for the environment. Development is sustainable if it also takes into account economic, human and social aspects: scarcity not only applies to natural resources; a highly educated and healthy population, well-functioning social networks, social trust, machines and infrastructure are also not in unlimited supply.” (CBS, 2019; based on Brundtland, Khalid, & Agnelli, 1987)



Source: <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material/>

4. Sustainable development goals

The UN looks at the world as a globe that is continually under development and movement. New technology rises, dictators fall, and unstable countries are working to stabilize. Within this dynamic world, there needs to be room for movement. If not, no progress will be available. In the end, movement is life. The goals are there to guide the movement of the world so that the present needs are fulfilled but without compromising that of the future generations.

As an example, you want climate action due to decrease global warming, reduce plastics in the sea, and prevent extinction of multiple species. To do this, you need to make sure that people can earn their money in a good way. This includes making sure that ivory hunters can earn their money in a different way, and that third world countries get access to more advanced and clean technology so that pollution will reduce. To do this, you need high-quality education, so people can learn to work in the newly developed jobs and with the new technology. At this point, you are investing in economic growth, industrial innovation, and the minimization of poverty. There is not just one focus point if we want to create a world that we, as well as future generations, can all enjoy.

By using this vision of sustainability, we decided to rewrite the initial question and to refocus from green goals and climate to a wider focus on creating a better world in the different segments. Our new question became:

“How do we stimulate all students and employees to think about and work with the 17 sustainability goals (UN) to improve the world for this and future generations?”

5. Meetings and presentations

From this point, time went fast. As a team, we had the job to come up with ideas about how our university could implement these goals into their school program and make employees aware of and enthusiastic about working with them. There was absolutely no limitation on the creative freedom we had. Large papers filled with ideas started to fill up the room.

Halfway through January 2018, we were invited to do our first real presentation on the Sustainability Day of Hanze UAS. Teachers, employees, and even the director were attending our presentation, and we were able to get feedback. Critical questions from the audience were made, and we had a lot to discuss in our workgroup.

We decided to focus on the small practical steps our university could take and just create a global vision of all the amazing work they could do (like integrating the different sustainability goals into the different schools). One of the main points was to make clear why the university should broaden the vision of sustainability from a green aspect to the goals of the UN, how students would benefit, and what the university could gain from this shift as well.

6. Convincing the director

In March 2018, we had the chance to do our final presentation, and we decided to try to get the director of the school to attend as well. We got the opportunity to give our presentation at a meeting of the director and some employees, but we had to pitch what we wanted to talk about to the organizer of the meeting first. They were pretty direct; we should not expect more than five minutes during the meeting. Two of our teammates did the pitch, and the organizer was so enthusiastic that we got ten whole minutes to present our idea.

At that point, we did our presentation, and the response was really great. For us as students, the Green Quest was finished. We had to reflect on our progress, shake hands, and all go our separate ways again. On the 26th of June, 2018, we received an email from our Green Quest coach that the Hanze UAS, our university, accepted the sustainability goals of the UN and that our project had made an essential addition to this decision.



Source: hanze.nl, 2018

Working in an interdisciplinary team on a real-life project is an amazing experience. To be able to pitch the ideas to the stakeholders at the university was even better. But, in the end, there is no better feeling than knowing that our team created something useful.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give special thanks to my fellow group mates: Olaf Booij, Steven Homsma, Annemiek van der Hoek, and Wietske Brouwer, who have worked so hard together with me on this subject. I am more than honored to be the one who writes this note!

References

Brundtland, G. H., Khalid, M., & Agnelli, S. (1987). *Our common future*. New York. <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

CBS (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek) (2019). *What is sustainability?* Available online: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/fag/specifiek/what-is-sustainability-> (accessed 26 Feb 2019)