Sustainable minds: The agenda for change (Pieter van Beukering)

Introduction

It is 1991. I am 23 years old, studying economics, working really hard so that sufficient time was left for travelling around the world. During my first trip to Indonesia I end up in an ecological expedition to the impressive mangroves along the coast of South Sulawesi. Because of my complete ignorance about the local flora and fauna, I have the noble task of dragging heavy equipment through the mud and at one point I am even allowed to hold the binoculars to spot birds. After three weeks, we spend our last evening in a beautiful bay furnished with sea grasses and coral reefs.

Somewhat disillusioned, I tell the leader of the expedition that I really regret to have chosen economics as my main study and not biology. His response changes my life: “You are wrong” he says, “you made an excellent choice. Without nature-minded economists, everything you see here will be gone in less than 10 years-time, no ecologist can prevent that. We need you!”.

How little did I know that 25 years later, I would be talking to you here today about Science for Sustainability. An audience full of clever minds, or even Sustainable Minds. I would like to invite you to think about what the Vrije Universiteit should do to become more sustainable? And what you can contribute to this mission of Science for Sustainability?
Sustainability at the VU now

But before doing so, I would like test how much you actually know about sustainability here at the VU.

Question 1. What causes the largest climate impact here at the VU? Air travel, Heating the buildings, Computer use, or Food consumption in the cantina? The answer is heating, but transport through commuters and air travel is also important.

Question 2. How many sustainability-related courses are offered here at the VU today? 75, 100, 125, or 150. The answer is 150 courses and the number is increasing with on average 10 courses per year. And the new courses are offered by many different faculties and disciplines: Food studies, business analytics and management and innovation.

And finally, just to check, who of you never heard of the UN Sustainable Development Goals? Great, so everybody knows them and should be able to answer the following question.
Question 3. To which of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals can the Vrije Universiteit contribute most?

OK, so know you have a slightly better idea where we stand at the moment. I would like to spend the remaining time, not about where we stand now, but rather where we could be going with the Agenda for Change for Science for Sustainability. In other words, we need a plan.

The Agenda for Change

…. and now you expect me to present the plan … A plan with targets, a team, activities … a budget. Of course, I did not come empty handed today. But what I will definitely not do is to present to you a blue-print on how to become the most sustainable university in the Netherlands or Europe. This is something that we can only do jointly.

Of course, the VU is genuinely committed. Science for Sustainability was selected as a priority theme in late 2015 and in the same period The Green Office was established, followed by the housing of the Green Business Club Zuidas. These decisions are very positive signals and provide the VU with a head start in their mission. Yet, green activities at the VU are only sustainable if they are created, implemented and maintained by you as sustainable minds. We need full ownership of Science for Sustainability at all levels in the university: the board, staff, researchers and students.
Did you know that the VU ranks on the 4th position of sustainable knowledge institutions in the Netherlands? I see many glazing eyes, very few of us are aware of this quality. If we score so well, what is our unique talent? What is our identity in sustainability? Everybody in Wageningen knows about their unique position in agricultural sustainability, and when you think of Delft and Eindhoven you immediately think of technological innovations, the solar challenge. But what makes the VU so special as a leading university in sustainability? What is our green identity?

Perhaps our talent in sustainability doesn’t lie in one specific area but rather in the diversity of disciplines. The VU may not develop the most drought prone crop, the smartest light bulb, or the most energy efficient car. Yet we do have world class geographers that develop the best climate adaptation plans. We have the smartest psychologists that develop insights in behavioral nudges, And we have economists that determine the optimal carbon tax to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In other words: we are all over the place, but are we sufficiently combining these unique strengths?
I believe we should increase cross-fertilization on this campus to get the maximum return on diversity. After all, sustainability calls for interdisciplinary and systemic solutions, not for silver bullets. Take for example the study lead by Jeroen Aerts in which the VU provided a comprehensive plan for the city of New York to adapt to climate change involving climate scientists, geographers, hydrologists, and economists. The plan is currently under implementation. Or in the area of teaching where under the People project, Alliander and six students from three different faculties at the VU jointly investigate opportunities for energy savings in poor neighborhoods in the Netherlands. Or even closer, this honors course where talented students from various backgrounds design creative solutions for a greener VU campus and Zuidas.

That automatically brings me to the next promise of Science for Sustainability: societal relevance. Not science for the sake of science but science which directly serves the community.

And how can we better serve society than to embrace the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals – the SDGs: our global compass for a better planet. Goals and targets for 2030 that have been scrutinized, discussed and ultimately adopted by thousands of organizations, governments and universities. Let us do the same.
Having said that, the SDGs are too diverse for us to excel in all of the 17 goals. If we really want to make a difference, focus is required. We will need to select those goals in which we have a comparative advantage. Our friends at the VU library conducted a bibliometric analysis to provide insights into our greatest talents in the SDGs. Although this is work in progress, the analysis shows that in terms of number of publications we are particularly strong in goal 13 – climate action (in which we publish 3.1 times more than the average Dutch university) and goal 17 – partnerships for the goals (2.4 times more). When focusing on the 1% most cited papers in each goal, the VU performs even better with very high scores for goal 2 – zero hunger (4.8 times more) and goal 15 – Life on land (11 times more).

If we zoom into the top publications on climate action (goal 13), we can also take a look at the societal impact. It shows that our publications are referenced in 411 policy documents, more than 1400 news stories and over 10,000 Tweets. And what is also interesting about these results is that the top publications in Climate Action were written by researchers with different backgrounds, economics, climate science, hydrology, geography, etc.
The sustainability leaders of the future [our students] may not necessarily get excited about top publications and impact factors. They want to be inspired in the classroom and on the campus. Therefore, we need to develop teaching programs and courses concentrated around our core SDGs in which this valuable expertise is shared with the next generation. Moreover, we should engage students in Science for Sustainability soon in their studies. The introductory courses of economics, social science, law, health and psychology should already highlight the relevance of sustainability within their own discipline, in the very first year, the first period!

But none of these good intentions will convince students if we ourselves do not give the good example. “Sustainability starts with ourselves”, is the Dutch expression. Look at the campus: does it signal sustainability? Look at our carbon footprint: does it demonstrate good citizenship? We can do so much more to increase our green credibility.
This brings me to the last promise of Science for Sustainability: **perseverance**. This image shows the collection boxes that were used by our founders, in order to raise enough funds to establish the Vrije Universiteit, penny after penny, year after year. A drawback of sustainability is that it often calls for sacrifices on the short term that pay back on the long term. In the spirit of Abraham Kuyper this means that if we strengthen our sustainability performance now, it will lead to more sustainable research, education, and campus in the near future.

**What’s next?**

So, what’s next? How are we going to use this *Agenda for Change as sustainable minds*? I already hinted at the four targets that we aim for in the coming year.

- **Research**: With the Amsterdam Sustainability Institute, we will create a lively platform, a place where researchers and PhDs of diverse backgrounds work together on a sustainable future. We will start with pilot project in which interfaculty collaboration is sustainability is promoted.

- **Education**: Through smart combinations of existing courses, we will create an appealing sustainability curriculum at the VU. We will offer flexible arrangements to enable students to choose sustainability courses within their personal interest.
• **Buildings:** New buildings at the VU campus need to be a landmark for sustainability, functioning as a living lab for students and researchers of the VU. And of course sustainability measures also need to be continuously implemented in our existing buildings.

• **Campus:** But as mentioned, “Sustainability starts with yourself”, so please also think about what you can do to increase the sustainability at the campus: fly less, print less, waste less, eat less meat.

Therefore, I have a question for you for which you are invited to answer this via social media. The question is: “What should the Vrije Universiteit do to become more sustainable? And what could you contribute to this mission?”

What kind of ideas? Well, only yesterday I connected FCO and the hydrology masters here at the VU who will use the future green roof of this meeting hall, above your heads, as a living lab. Students will take measurements and advice FCO on the design. By the way, we could also use some input from Green IT to make this a really smart system. So please, be creative and post your ideas with us at #sustainable minds.

**Closing remark**
Let me end with a personal note. This is me with my friends celebrating our 50th birthday in a beautiful castle in the Scottish highlands. We started our studies at the same time, in the mid-eighties, each of us drifting in completely different directions, ending up in various segments in society and in different parts of the world. It is safe to say that I have always been greenest among them, but in the meantime sustainability has also entered their hearts. Apparently, when you turn 50, you become more aware of the heritage you leave behind: about the principle that sustainability requires us to leave this planet to our children and grand-children in a better state than when we were born. Today, most of these men bring sustainability in practice in their daily work and lives.

For me this personal anecdote acknowledges that sustainability is no longer a niche, but has become mainstream. Mainstream in society, mainstream at the VU, and mainstream with the help of your sustainable minds.

Thank you for your attention.