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Higher Education Taking Action towards the Sustainable Development Goals:
Perspectives from Asia and Europe

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Universities Need to Make Sustainable Consumption Matter

The United Nations have set Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in order to tackle some of the major global problems that we face by the year 2030. In total there are 17 goals that comprise 169 smaller targets. SDG12 addresses sustainable consumption and production patterns. The goal promotes resource and energy efficiency, sustainable infrastructure, and providing access to basic services, green and decent jobs and a better quality of life for all (*United Nations n.d.*). It is also closely linked to several other goals, because sustainable consumption reduces poverty, uses clean energy, guarantees decent employment and generates economic growth, and reduces inequalities, just to name some aspects. Because of this relation it is a powerful mean for getting closer to achieving the goals. Universities need to lead the way in making sustainable consumption matter and visible for everyone in the university community.

I think people know what is sustainable and not in principle, but in practice choosing sustainable consumption is not simple because the whole production process is not transparent. There may be details that we are not aware of as consumers. Some choice of materials may be obvious for us out of habit, but we are not conscious about its effects on the environment, for example. Universities need to create visible guidelines for sustainable consumption and adopt those in their own actions. This way universities can both act sustainably, increase the knowledge in their own communities about the matter, and be role-models for other organisations around them and have a social impact larger than just their own size.

Sustainable consumption includes a large environmental aspect. Through consumption universities can have a say on energy, water, or the amount of waste, for example. Global Footprint Network uses Earth Overshoot Day to indicate when the annual consumption has exceeded the earth's capacity to regenerate those resources in the whole year. Since 1970, the date has shifted from the end of December to the beginning of August (*Global Footprint Network, n.d.*). Some ways in which universities can promote sustainable consumption is to commit to using clean and renewable energy, avoid excessive travelling, and

reduce the generation of waste. On top of their own consumption choices, it is worth remembering that universities do valuable research that also helps others in acquiring knowledge about the consequences of their choices as well as generates alternative ways for production and behaviour.

In addition to the environmental aspect, universities also need to take into account the social consequences of their consumption behaviour. The SDGs also promote decent work and economic growth (SDG8), which aims to increase youth employment, promote labour rights, eradicate forced labour and child labour, and guarantee a safe working environment. Universities need to be aware of the circumstances where the products they consume were produced and refuse to consume anything when there is a doubt that these rights were respected. Of course, they also need to be an example for others and make sure that their own working conditions are promoting these principles. This means non-discriminatory recruiting, respecting labour rights, and encouraging innovation, for instance.

Besides respecting sustainable consumption in their own choices, universities also need to raise awareness and educate their community about the principles. On the most basic level this means making those principle visible and available for everyone, which makes it possible for everyone to learn about them and act accordingly. Even if the content of the principles would not be that familiar, everyone would need to be aware that these kinds of guidelines exist. A more active approach is to educate the community about these and teaching about sustainable consumption, at least for those who are in charge of making the consumption choices and students who are studying a somehow related field. To engage the surrounding community, NGOs can also be used for this target.

My own university has a large and active student union (Student Union of the University of Helsinki), which owns all of the lunchrooms, cafeterias and catering services on campus. They have implemented many encouraging examples of sustainable consumption, for example, they don't serve any fish threatened by overfishing, offer Fair Trade products in many categories, always have at least one vegetarian option available, and reduce food waste by selling excess meals at the end of the day at a lower price (*HYY Group, n.d.*). The student union also has active and popular committees for developmental and environmental issues where the students can act to make a change and raise the awareness of others.

In conclusion, I want to challenge universities to lead the way in sustainable consumption. This means that they need to create clear guidelines and instructions for sustainable development that take into account both the environmental and social consequences of their choices, act according to those guidelines in all situations, and educate their community about sustainable consumption. Universities are a large actor in the society, so acting as a role-model can encourage others to implement the same guidelines, as well as

bring the issue into public discussion. Choosing sustainable options may be more expensive, time-consuming and narrow down the available options, but it is definitely worth the work if it helps in reaching the SDGs and increases the quality of life of people, especially in the developing world.

References

United Nations n.d., *Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*, viewed 16 April 2019, < <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/> >

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