University Leadership and Resilience in the Age of Sustainability

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY ASSOCIATION

Connecting the dots on sustainability and resilience

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THIS PRESENTATION

- An evidence-based analysis to highlight trends and research insights for University leaders

- **Defines the Sustainability challenge from a _Leadership and Governance_ perspective.**

- Spells out the transitions we must see to make meaningful progress

- **Asks 5 Key Questions – to help asssess where you/your insittution is at.**

Higher Education for Sustainability

Q. What core sustainability concepts and strategies are relevant to higher education?
Q. How has the higher education sector's engagement with sustainability evolved over time, and what are the key turning points and historical contexts that have shaped this evolution?
Q. What recent European policy frameworks, measures and programmes inform and influence higher education for sustainability?
Q. What changes are HEIs embracing in response to calls for a transformative approach to education and the need for a new 'social contract' that prioritises sustainability?

Leadership and Learning

Q. What is the sustainability leadership challenge facing senior higher education leaders?
Q. What is the higher education leadership challenge facing senior higher education leaders?
Q. How do higher education leaders learn and develop? What support is available?
Q. What bespoke sustainability leadership development programmes exist for higher education leaders?
Q. What does research and evaluation tell us about the effectiveness of current offerings?
Q. What are the critical success factors that support leadership development for sustainability in higher education?

Advancing Leadership Capacity for Sustainability

Q. What are the specific senior leadership skills, competencies, and mindsets necessary for advancing sustainability within HEIs?
Q. What would a leadership competency framework for senior higher education leaders look like?
Q. What policy actions and measures can be taken to advance senior leadership for sustainability in higher education?

European Commission

EENEE
European Expert Network on Economics of Education

https://eenee.eu/en/

SD part of the change narrative

SD cannot be treated in isolation

- *The world is changing… HE contexts are changing…*

- *Geo-political tensions and a new global dynamic*
- **Economic and energy instability**
- *Greater political intervention in education*
- **Demographic changes**
- *Digitalisation and influence of AI*
- **Climate change and sustainable development**
- *New expectations for HEIs*

- "Higher education institutions have a unique responsibility to lead the transformation towards sustainability."

- "Sustainability leadership is not optional — it's fundamental to the future relevance of higher education."

- "Sustainability performance is fast becoming a global benchmark for university leadership and competitiveness."

- "Universities that fail to lead on sustainability risk falling behind in relevance, competitiveness, and societal trust"

- To attain sustainability, HEIs must identify themselves as more than knowledge generators or disseminators

- "The sector has the capacity to do more than generate science – it must focus on changing mindsets, building green skills and driving innovation and influence"
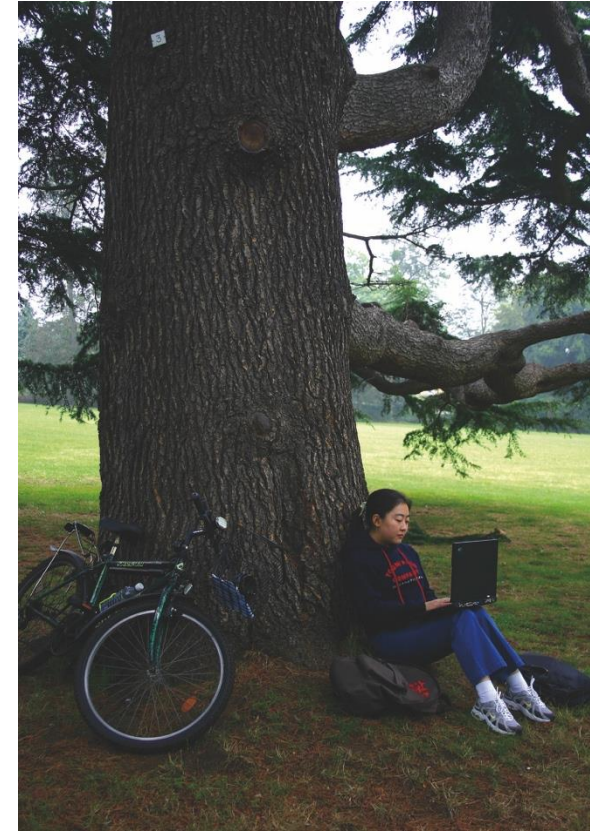
Sustainability is no longer a side-project - it's core to leadership, strategy & legacy

Evidence suggests:

- **Sustainability cannot and should not be treated in isolation.**

- **It is not a separate agenda -** to competitiveness, internationalisation, financial viability

- **It is not a thematic agenda –** or about adding SDGs across research/courses

- **Its is a change agenda –** recognising that universities are themselves contributors to unsustainable development.

Lack of Strategic Understanding
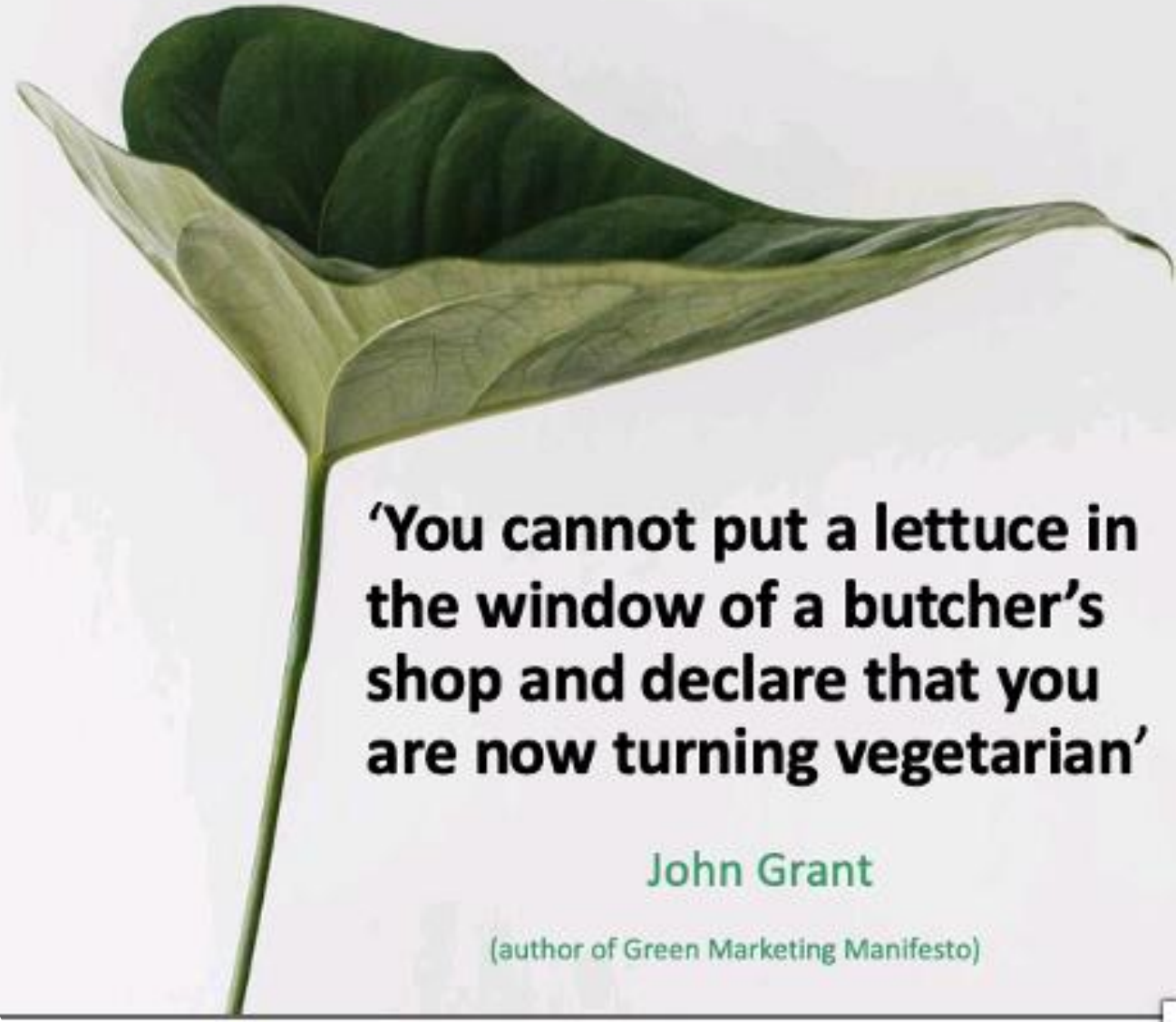
'You cannot put a lettuce in the window of a butcher's shop and declare that you are now turning vegetarian'

John Grant

(author of Green Marketing Manifesto)

Strategic Understanding

Courses that specialise in sustainability

Vs embedding of sustainability competences across all courses

Specialist research in sustainability

Vs sustainability as a core concern of all research efforts.

A building in campus that showcases sustainability

Vs embedding of sustainability across the estates

A stand alone sustainability strategy

Vs sustainability as a concern in internationalisation, digitisation

Champions identifed in senior teams

Vs embedding across SM responsibilties.

Q. Where does sustainability sit within your institution?

Q. Is it embedded across all strategic priorities of the institution?

Q. Who has responsibility for sustainability?

Q. Is it focused on generating sustainability specialists/prof or preparing the societiy and the HE sector for a transition towards sustainability

Strategic Understanding

You can tell when a leader of the Institution has a strategic understanding of sustainabilty because....

- **Carbon Neutrality:** Go beyond cutting carbon - reducing fossil fuel dependence and investing in renewables.

- **Circular Economy:** Banning single-use plastics and incorporating sustainable procurement.

- **Sustainable Finance:** Green bonds and ESG investment strategies used to manage University funds and subsidise campus projects. Divestment growing in importance.

- **Curriculum Integration:** Avoid SDG mapping – invest in teaching staff development, sustainability competences; real world experiences.
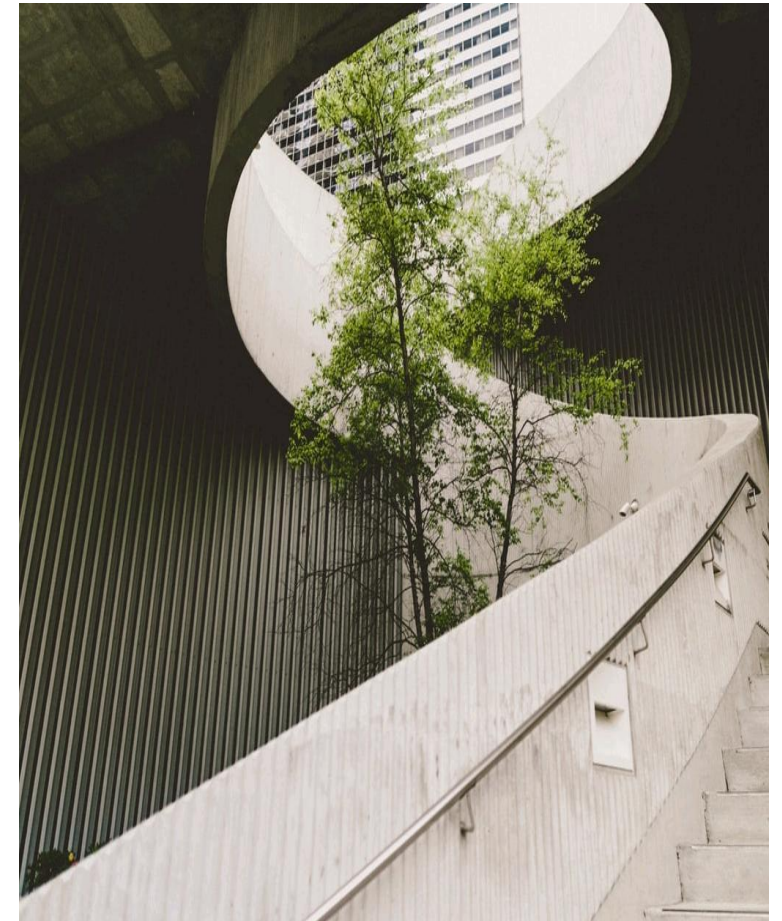
Strategic Understanding

You can tell when a leader of the Institution has a strategic understanding of resilience because....

- **Infrastructure Adaptation:** Flood-resistant buildings, green roofs, and energy-efficient retrofits

- **Disaster Preparedness:** AI-driven risk models and emergency response systems to anticipate climate-related disruptions

- **Mental Health & Sustainability:** Resilience for students and staff, recognizing the psychological impact of climate anxiety.

- **Technology & Smart Campuses:** AI, blockchain, and IoT leveraged for energy management, security, and supply chain resilience.

What visible indications of a commitment to sustainability students see or are aware of on their campus

- Water bottle refill stations
- Recycling bins next to trash cans
- Bike or scooter borrowing program
- Campaigns encouraging students to walk, bike or scooter
- Electric vehicle charging stations
- Solar panels
- Campuswide events centered around reducing waste
- Green roofs or rooftop gardens
- Ban on non-essential single-use plastic
- Pollinator gardens
- Solar-powered picnic tables with charging stations
- Wind turbines
- Energy use meters
- None of the above

Student Voice, an Inside Higher Ed and College Pulse collaboration, is presented by:

https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/academics/2023/01/02/sustainability-actions-students-take-and-want-their-colleges
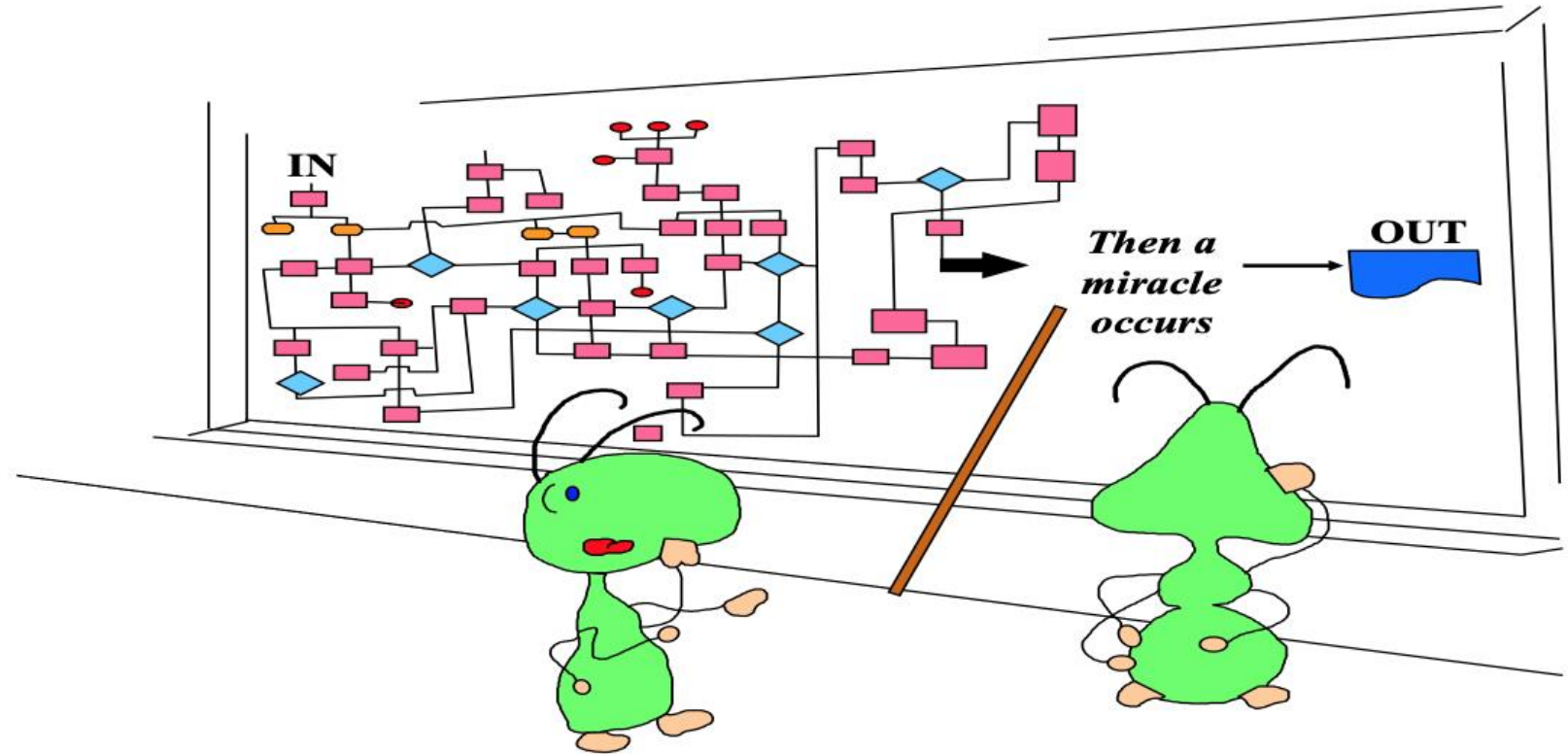
Leadership and Governance

Understanding Change

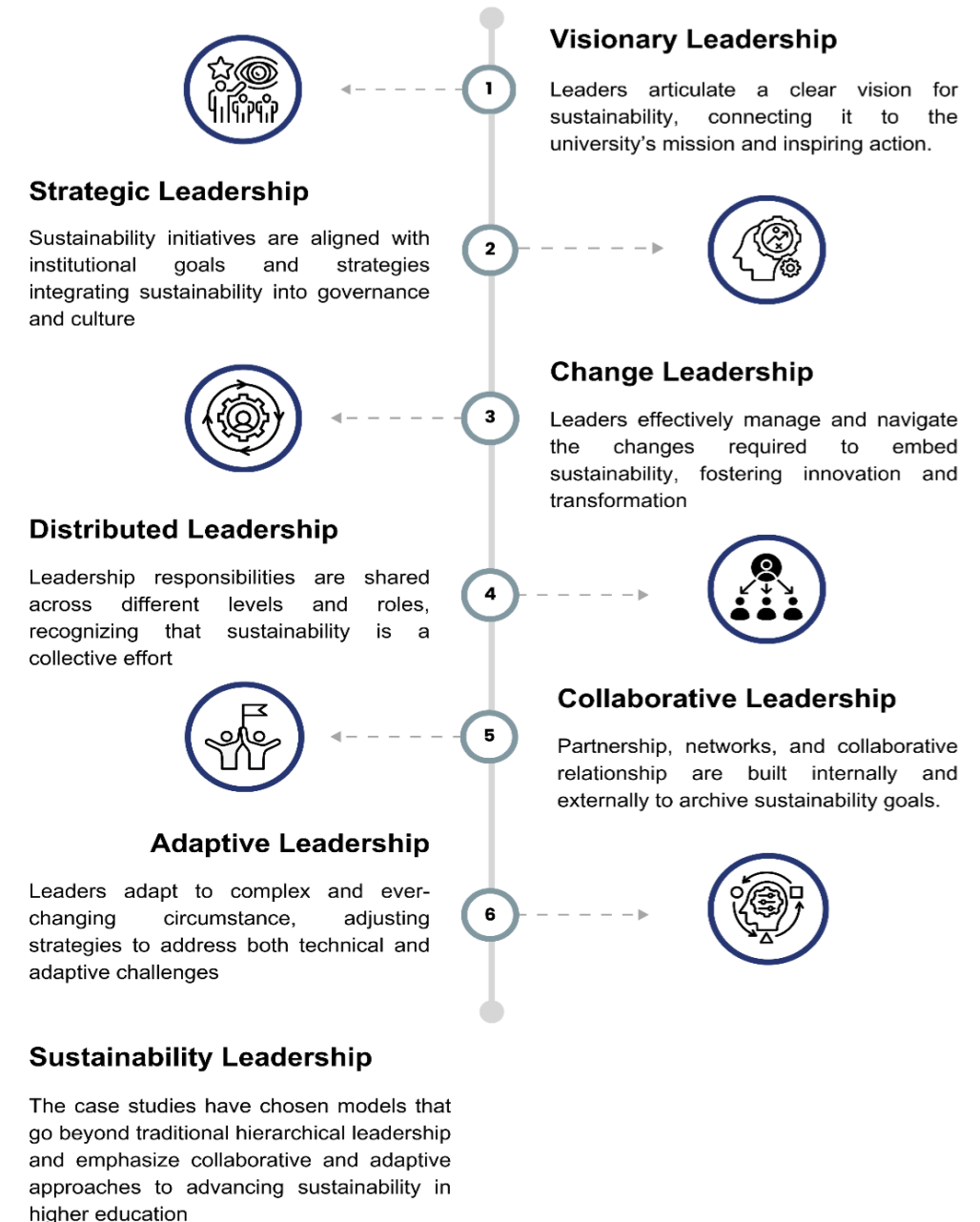"Good work ……. but I think we need just a little more detail right here"

The Leadership Challenge

- The challenge is complex and profound for university rectors, presidents, and senior leadership teams (complexity).

- Must navigate competing priorities and interconnected policy landscapes (systemic view).

- Existing HE frameworks and governance structures often perpetuate siloed thinking, short-term planning horizons (change management)

The case studies are underpinned by a range of leadership types and models although there are not implicitly identified or shared with participants

Visionary Leadership

1 — Leaders articulate a clear vision for sustainability, connecting it to the university's mission and inspiring action.

Strategic Leadership

Sustainability initiatives are aligned with institutional goals and strategies integrating sustainability into governance and culture

2

Change Leadership

3 — Leaders effectively manage and navigate the changes required to embed sustainability, fostering innovation and transformation

Distributed Leadership

Leadership responsibilities are shared across different levels and roles, recognizing that sustainability is a collective effort

4

Collaborative Leadership

5 — Partnership, networks, and collaborative relationship are built internally and externally to archive sustainability goals.

Adaptive Leadership

Leaders adapt to complex and ever-changing circumstance, adjusting strategies to address both technical and adaptive challenges

6

Sustainability Leadership

The case studies have chosen models that go beyond traditional hierarchical leadership and emphasize collaborative and adaptive approaches to advancing sustainability in higher education

The Leadership Challenge

Leaders face the dual task of **overcoming internal barriers** while navigating **external demands.**

Q. What opportunities exist to self assess your competences in this area?

Q. What support exists to develop or advance these competences?

Figure 4. A Sustainability Leadership Competence Framework

LEARNING TO KNOW
Competencies for acquiring and applying sustainability knowledge:

- **Global Challenges** – Comprehensive graphs of global sustainability challenges (e.g., climate change, biodiversity loss, social equity) and their implications for higher education.
- **Sustainability Frameworks and Practices** - Knowledge of relevant sustainability frameworks (e.g., Sustainable Development Goals) and best practices in campus operations, curriculum development, research and institutional governance.
- **Regulatory and Funding Landscape** - Awareness of national, and international sustainability regulations, compliance requirements, and funding opportunities to support sustainability initiatives.
- **Navigating Ambiguity and Uncertainty**: Capacity to make informed decisions and lead confidently in situations characterized by complexity, unpredictability, and incomplete information.
- **Systems Thinking and Analysis**: Mapping and analysing complex systems within universities to identify interdependencies and leverage points for transformative change.
- **Data-Driven Decision-Making**: Proficiency in using data analytics for sustainability assessment, performance tracking, and transparent reporting.
- **Anticipating Trends**: Strategic foresight to identify emerging trends and reposition the institution to capitalise on future sustainability opportunities.

LEARNING TO BE
Competencies for personal growth and authentic leadership:

- **Ethical Leadership**: Demonstrating integrity and accountability through decision-making grounded in sustainability and responsibility.
- **Resilience and Adaptability**: Maintaining composure and flexibility amidst complex sustainability challenges and institutional resistance.
- **Reflective Practice**: Engaging in cotinuous self-assessment and learning to enhance personal and professional growth.
- **Authentic Commitment**: Leading by example, inspiring others to adopt sustainability practices across institutional settings.
- **Emotional Intelligence**: Inspiring and empowering stakeholders by understanding and managing emotions.
- **Integrity in Action**: Upholding high moral and ethical standards in decision-making and leadership practices.

The competences for higher education managers for sustainable leadership

LEARNING TO CHANGE
Competencies for driving transformation and innovation:

- **Vision and Strategic Thinking**: Creating and articulating a compelling vision for university transformation toward sustainability.
- **Strategic Development**: Crafting clear sustainability strategies aligned with the core mission and priorities of the university.
- **Cultural Change**: Leading culture shifts to embed sustainability-focused thinking and practices across the institution.
- **Curriculum Redesign**: Driving the development and redesign in response to sustainability.
- **Pedagogical Transformation**: Leading pedagogical transformation across the institution and in ways that make a dfference to sustainability learning outcomes.
- **Campus Innovation**: Promoting experimentation and the "living lab" concept to test and implement sustainability solutions.
- **Scaling-up:** Developing strategies that scale-up sustainability initiatives using effective change management strategies.
- **Overcoming Institutional Resistance**: Navigating and mitigating resistance to transformative change aligned with sustainability.

LEARNING TO WORK WITH OTHERS
Competencies for collaborative engagement and stakeholder management:

- **Interdisciplinary Leadership**: Building, inspiring, and leading cross- functional and inter-disciplinary teams to foster collaborative innovation in sustainability.
- **Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement**: Facilitating meaningful, inclusive dialogues with students, faculty, administrators, and external partners.
- **Global and Regional Networking**: Establishing and maintaining strategic partnerships with global and regional sustainability bodies and professional associations.
- **Conflict Resolution and Consensus Building**: Ability to mediate differences, resolve conflicts, and foster consensus around sustainability priorities.
- **Relational Transparency**: Maintaining honest and open communication to build stakeholder trust and alignment.
- **Accountability**: Establishing a culture of accountability and responsible decision-making guided by a strong moral compass.
- **Empowering Others**: Supporting insitutional development and capacity-building of others toward sustainability leadership.

Governance Bodies and Structures

Responsibilities of Governance Bodies
- Academic Governance:
- Student admissions
- Academic standards
- Academic quality

Corporate Governance:
- Finance
- Public relations
- Estates management

Strategic Direction and Accountability
- Set and monitor strategic goals
- Approve annual budgets
- Ensure legislative compliance
- Chart future directions

Governing bodies need to :

- **Lack of understanding governance responsibilities In sustainability**

- **Challenge perceptions of sustainability as a fringe activity**

- **Change rigid hierarchical structures and academic silos that do not support SD.**

Some HEIs have taken their first steps in establishing governance structures in support of sustainability.

- They have recruited a member of council for their sustainability expertise.

- Identified responsibilities for the rector or vice-rector to advance sustainability.

- revised vision and strategic plans to embed sustainability as a core value.

- Set measurable targets and accountability mechanisms reporting to govering bodu annually.

Q. What steps have been taken by your governing body to address governance responsibilities in sustainability?

Take a Sattelite View

Drive **whole-system responses**
Embed sustainability into **core institutional practices**

Change the Frame...

Understand sustainability as a **strategic priority**

Change Perspectives

Give new glasses to colleagues - **training and support**

Microscopes to telescopes

Move **beyond the science**
Move **beyond the here and now**
Move **beyond problem-solving focus**
Envisioning **the future**

Mirrors to Lighthouses

Move beyond mirroring to
inspire, create and **showcase
alternative pathways**

MIRRORS OR LIGHTHOUSES?

- ***Sus is about questioning***: the way we govern and organise ourselves; the way we operate and work; how this has impact on people and planet.

- ***Sus is about responsibility and changing the future*** developing mind-sets and skills that help anticipate as well as create alternatives

LIGHT HOUSE MOMENTS

"It is hard to imagine any other interventions that could yield such dramatic benefits in so short a span of time"

Andrew Balmford, UoC

UNIVERSITY CATERING

- **2019 University of Cambridge removed beef and lamb from the menu and added plant-based food options 14 outlets and 1,500 hospitality events a year.**

- **Removing unsustainable fish and reduced food waste**

- **Significant impact on the Carbon footprint of the University**

- **Reduced carbon footprint of food by 33%**

LIGHT HOUSE MOMENTS

HEIs in 8 EU countries, accepted at least €90 million from oil and gas companies between 2016 and 2023 (Investigate Europe 2024).

Of that total, 10 of Norway's HEIs received €68 million in fossil fuel funding.

This issue will dominate HEIs policy and governance over the coming decade.

Chalmers University of Technology, Sweden

Sold $600,000 in fossil-fuel holdings (CUT 2015)

ANU - longest standing commitment

According to 350.Org, of 221 universities that committed to be free from fossil fuels,

It's Time to Divest from Fossil Fuels.

70% of UK Universities divesteed. £9bn held in by Uk Universities endowment fund (P&P 2024)

Stanford - highest-profile university divestment campaign. In 2014, divested its endowment (US$18.7 billion), from holdings in coal extraction

More Qs

Q. What will be your HEIs lighthouse moment?

Q. How can HEIs help to rapidly changing landscape rather than simply help us understand the world as it is changing?

Q. What needs to change and how can your leadership make this difference?

THE FUTURE?

- *The Sectors engagement with Sd has changed over the decades*

- *1980s-90s making high level commitments and positioning its science to influence/inform multi-lateral policy agendas*

- *2000s, -focus on specialist, courses, green campuses and outreach actions.*

- *2010s -establishing specialist positions in institutions Director and Deans of Sus; Specialist roles in Estates for Carbon; transport;; procurement and reporting, student engagement partnerships local government.*

- *2020s – living labs and SDGS, rankings, partnerships business and industry*

- The Future…… yours to write…..