

SFS's position: The sustainable academy

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1. Introduction

This position is an opinion document subordinate to the Programme of Principles of Sweden's National Union of Students (SFS), with the aim of clarifying SFS's opinions on specific issues. The standpoint shall constitute guidance for SFS's elected representatives and office. SFS's position: The sustainable academy presents more detailed opinions on sustainable development. In the document, "student" refers to students within education at first-, second- and third-cycle level.

In the document, sustainable development refers to a development that ensures a healthy and sound environment, economic and social welfare, as well as justice, without it being at the expense of future generations.

2. The academy's role in sustainable development

Academic freedom, integrity and space for critical dialogue are basic prerequisites for high quality education and research. To enable the higher education institutions to contribute most effectively, they must be fundamentally independent stakeholders in society. The academy has the responsibility to disseminate and utilise knowledge about sustainable development and to contribute objectivity to the social debate. The Academy plays a crucial part in generating new knowledge on sustainability through research.

Science and research-linked education of the highest quality is a prerequisite for the transition to a sustainable society. SFS believes that durable, stable and resilient institutions and structures are required to implement the transition. The academy, and in particular the students, play a supporting role in this.

The academy's remit to create and convey knowledge to promote society's sustainable development presupposes that the content of education and research, as well as its results, are free of political influence. Politics, business and society have extensive and legitimate expectations that research and higher education will contribute to a sustainable society. Political control of resources to the higher education institutions related to central challenges for society should therefore promote the institutions' freedom to, individually or collectively, develop well thought-out approaches and strategic perspectives on sustainability within education, research and collaboration, rather than restrict them.

3. Control and financing

The universities have a major part to play in the transition, both in terms of reducing their own adverse impact on the environment and the climate, and contributing relevant knowledge to other sectors of society. It is of major importance that control and financing models for academia also enable the higher education institutions, as the bodies which conduct scientific and artistic research, to set good examples.

The Higher Education Act stipulates that universities and colleges should promote sustainable development, which means that the institutions have a clear responsibility that the issue permeates all activities. SFS believes that the higher education institutions should work in tandem not just coherently but exceedingly to promote sustainable development. This should take place systematically, clearly and be easily accessible for students as well as for others within the academic world.

It is important that there are also targets and ambitions for each institution's work on sustainable development, both in relation to their contribution to the transition for society in general, and for their own transition. The higher education institutions should take full ownership of the task. The organisation can vary depending on, for example, the institution's size and focus. It is important that there is an explicit plan for the work and that sustainable development is integrated into existing processes and that it is linked to clear management and organisational structures.

The university should identify risks, challenges and opportunities when the targets are set, but also relate them to the national targets to which Sweden has committed itself. The higher education institutions should promote sustainable development and be at the forefront of meeting the national targets to the same extent as other authorities, regardless of whether they are an authority or not. This work should be followed-up by both the higher education institution itself and by the supervisory body. Furthermore, higher education institutions have an additional responsibility to assist other stakeholders.

The sustainability work should be a part of the ordinary activities and each higher education institution should therefore allocate resources to finance it. Besides this, SFS believes that there is a reason for each institution to account for their work and initiatives within sustainability in a specific schedule.

4. Education, research and collaboration

The academy conducts teaching, research and collaboration that contributes to sustainable development. The higher education institutions should have targets for sustainable development at all educational levels and within all subject areas.

Relevant perspectives on sustainable development should be integrated in all programmes. Different challenges for society can be addressed for the relevant subject area. Sustainable development should be integrated in the programme based on a multidisciplinary approach, as the different social challenges cannot be dealt with in isolation. There should be a systematic follow-up and development of the programme where sustainable development is concerned.

The programme should give the students sustainability skills that are relevant for their subject area and the programmes' aim in order to enable the students to contribute to the transition to a sustainable society. The transition to a more sustainable society affects all scientific fields. SFS therefore considers that all programmes can and should address relevant sustainability aspects, however, this presupposes that the teaching staff and supervisors have relevant expertise. If that expertise is absent SFS deems it the responsibility of the institution of higher education to provide it. What expertise this is varies between subject areas.

The integration of sustainable development in education should be achieved through the development of students' knowledge of sustainable development, their ability to contribute to sustainable development, furthermore the teaching should be done in a sustainable and inclusive way. SFS deems that the work on sustainability in education implies more interdisciplinary methods to solve the ecological, social and economical issues our society and the world stands before.

The transition towards a sustainable society demands research. Both in order to develop innovation but also implement it. The higher education institutions have different prerequisites and opportunities in regards to scientists and teachers having both knowledge and the resources to work on these issues. Research requires resources and while all scientists should be allowed to choose research area freely and operate within the frameworks of academic freedom, the State, the higher education institutions and other stakeholders have a central role in, and are responsible for fostering research that contributes to sustainable development.

The higher education institutions have a central role in acting as collaborative partners, as well as meeting places. It is of great importance that the research that is conducted is presented and highlighted. The activities that take place at or in connection to the higher education institutions play a central and important role for mutual learning. A part of the collaboration entails creating contact points and in this respect trade and industry, authorities, relevant actors in civil society and others bodies are central contributors. In order to have an influence on both individuals and society, utilisation of

the education and research that exists at the higher education institutions is a cornerstone.

5. The higher education institutions' own environmental and climate impact

The institutions are large organisations and consequently have a significant impact on the environment and the climate, both in their local environment and at the global level. SFS deems that institutions of higher education should identify areas in which they as an organization have the biggest impact on both climate and environment and also which sustainability investments yield best returns. Student representatives should be involved in the identification and decision process. CO₂ emissions and asset management are two aspects SFS deems crucial for all institutions of higher education.

SFS anser att lärosätena ska identifiera vad inom deras organisation som orsakar störst miljö- och klimatpåverkan samt vilka hållbarhetsåtgärder som gör störst nytta. Studentrepresentanter ska vara involverade i identifierings- och beslutsprocesserna. Koldioxidutsläpp och kapitalförvaltning är två aspekter som SFS anser är centrala för alla lärosäten.

The public universities and colleges are the authorities which account for the greatest carbon dioxide emissions from air travel. The role of travel in the activities of the academic world as well as other sectors of society which require air travel, therefore needs to be re-evaluated. Other parts of the universities' activities also account for extensive climate emissions. SFS deems that every institution of higher education should identify where and in which way the organization has the biggest negative impact on the climate and strive to minimize it.

The transition to sustainable development cannot be discussed in a national perspective, but must be seen as a global issue. Addressing the global challenges that sustainable development entails requires cooperation across national borders. Mobility among students, researchers and teachers between different higher education institutions includes opportunities to develop common strategies to meet the global challenges.

Swedish institutions of higher education should have more ambitious targets than simply to become climate-neutral themselves. A prerequisite for institutions being able to implement measures of improvements and follow up on them is having enough resources and the structural basis for change. Sweden, including the higher education institutions, has a great capacity to help the whole world's transition, which also entails opportunities for students to operate in an international context. Internationalisation through travel can entail increased emissions. The universities have a responsibility to use digital communication and efficient transportation in order to minimise emissions.