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A University Experience in Implementing the Whole Institutional Approach for Sustainability with the Earth Charter: Lessons Learned



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I will not start this article by saying that we are currently experiencing a planetary crisis; we know this already, especially you, the reader, who chose to read a magazine with this editorial line. Instead, I want to reflect on this current time of change and the role of universities, based on my experience implementing a sustainability programme in a Brazilian university using a Whole Institutional Approach, based on the values of the Earth Charter (EC).

Changes are challenging, and even if we say otherwise, most human beings resist them. Whenever we must seek a new balance, we go through a difficult transition phase, where the thought patterns that created the old system become more present and more powerful. It is fear that takes us to this comfortable place, with the results we know, fuelled by the interests of those who benefit from the status quo and who seek to maintain control of the patterns and structures that gave rise to it. However, as new ideas and practices seep through the cracks and crevices of the old system, they add to the increasingly unsustainable weight of the previous framework and lead to its ruin. I believe that we are on the threshold of a great change because the current system can no longer envision paths or offer solutions to the concerns of the emerging future. In response, we seek the comfort of old formulas and solutions, in a movement that makes the old paradigm increasingly heavy and unsustainable. Although this widens the gaps where new ways of seeing the world thrive, there is still no clear path with new patterns of thought.

But what role do universities play in this scenario? The old system and the new represent two opposite paradigms on a spectrum with many possible gradations in between, while the new is still a nebulous future. We need to understand what we are attempting to hold onto and keep, so that we can let them go and rise above the situation to reflect, observe and see new paths. This, then, should be the main contribution of universities in the current times.

In 2008, I was the leader of the Sustainable Methodist Programme, at the Methodist University of São Paulo in Brazil. I describe in detail how this programme was implemented and some initial results in Matarazzo-Neuberger (2010). The following video gives an overview of the programme and presents its results, based on testimonials from participants from all segments of the university [<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDU6Ya6Jies>]. This article and video, prepared over a decade ago, clearly highlight what we did and the reasons that contributed to the success of this programme. In this new article, I will reflect on the lessons I learned from this experience, the reasons for this success, as well as its subsequent decline. Let's start with the reasons for success.

In 2006, faculty, students and administrative staff created a conducive climate for sustainability within the university. From there, the intention and common commitment arose to incorporate sustainability at the core of our work, as an



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institutional value, integrated throughout the curriculum of all courses offered and in the university's management. In this fertile ground, the seed of the programme was planted, and from the outset, the entire university community was invited to become gardeners. The discussions generated from course curriculum mapping and the input from the administration revealed a scenario with the potential to unite the entire university. University leadership prioritized sustainability in every speech, and the combination of this determination and the community's aspirations, along with deep and genuine listening, guided the collaborative development of the programme's direction and were crucial for its successful implementation. There was space, support, and encouragement to develop a shared vision of doing the right thing, which was important for that moment and for our common future. Few things are as memorable in life as being part of a group driven by this energy.

Continuing to collaboratively build a common direction required dedication to

reflect, discuss, and adopt shared values and to redefine the definition of sustainability which had become overused and already had numerous definitions at the time. It was at this moment that we decided to adopt the Earth Charter (EC) and its principles as our definition of sustainability, basing our programme on a common dream for the future, written and endorsed by people from all over the world, and which reclaims values that can collectively make us better. The Earth Charter's pillars and principles are so systematically interconnected and interdependent that even when a particular discipline falls into one of the pillars, such as social and economic justice, it is impossible to consider its principles without also considering respect and care for the community of life, ecological integrity, democracy, non-violence, and peace. Thus, despite our different approaches, we were integrated, in the same boat and on the same course, guided by a clear shared vision and a common aspiration.



And the programme thrived. We won successive awards, not only the university itself, but also the students and their projects; 232 faculty members, representing 41% of the university's faculty at the time, went through the Leadership Development Programme in Education for Sustainability in Higher Education, as did all managers and administrative supervisors, free of charge. The goal was to develop and empower leadership and create opportunities for the adoption of new teaching and management methodologies. Even the top leadership, represented by directors, vice-rectors, and the rector, went through the programme. Changes also occurred in management. An ecological footprint assessment of the university, which evaluated energy use, water consumption, waste generation, and supply chain, led to the development of plans and reforms that allowed significant savings and actions in the area of conscious consumption, many of which were led by the students themselves. The

sustainability vision articulated in the EC reached the classrooms, departments, and other spheres of decision-making and areas of action of the university, and was extended to the surrounding communities, expanding the university's involvement in solidarity economy programmes aimed at low-income communities, as well as entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

Sustainability became a research focus in all courses and led to projects that integrated teams of professors and students from departments who barely knew each other before. This is how the former Environmental Center was elevated to become the Center for Sustainability, becoming a space for exchange and learning for the entire university. We became the subject of articles, videos and interviews and were invited to give lectures at other educational institutions. This series of events brought great visibility to the programme, much more than we could have anticipated when we started.



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However, I didn't perceive the signs of the programme's decline that began as early as 2012. Vanity and ego are pillars validated and encouraged by the structure and functioning of universities. The position of prominence I assumed in this wave of success, partly because there was no expansion in the team leading the programme, ended up exacerbating weaknesses, especially after changes in the institution leadership. The programme's



reach and the development of new leaders also represented a parallel power to departments and directorates, something that the predominantly male and hierarchical command structures started to view with suspicion. Another problem was the mindset of having achieved the goal that emerged in the wake of the programme's success which shifted management's focus to other objectives.

To paraphrase Cortella, the human condition loses substance and vital energy every time it feels fully comfortable with the way things already are, succumbing to the seduction of rest and immobilizing itself in accommodation. Satisfaction concludes, ends, finishes; satisfaction leaves no room for continuity, for further progress, for persistence, for unfolding. Satisfaction calms, limits, dampens (2015, p.11). The change of values required in the implementation and continuity of a programme like this is a process, and to reach the essence, like peeling an onion, it is necessary to strip away many layers of old habits and comfortable truths to create space for the new to settle. We had built at most three layers of this new framework, namely: discovering a common purpose with the adoption of the principles of the EC, training of faculty and administrative staff, and the cross-cutting inclusion of sustainability in the curricula of the courses offered when the focus of the management was redirected.

The fissures caused by the aforementioned reasons undermined the energy of the group and opened up space for new

versions of sustainability aligned with market values and slowly gained ground among faculty members who were no longer fully aligned with the programme. The programme began to decline in 2014, and by 2017, it no longer existed.

Conclusions

Many lessons can be learned from this experience. As mentioned in the introduction, we need to rise above the situation to reflect, observe, and see new paths. It's not easy. Market pressures for workforce training rather than training individuals who can create change exist and are powerful. Training students for a market in a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) and BANI (brittle, anxious, non-linear and incomprehensible) world is difficult because the world will not be the same when they graduate. Moreover, it disguises changes to avoid making real change because the underlying values are the same ones that created the problems. By creating professionals solely focused on seeking solutions without teaching them to reflect on the causes and avoid generating problems in the first place, we perpetuate a cycle where today's solutions become tomorrow's problems. Without developing critical thinking, imagination and consequently the capacity for creation, we are destined to endlessly repeat the same cycle. As Hoffman and Ehrenfeld (2017, pgs. 4, 6) state, reducing the unsustainability of our way of life is not the same as creating sustainability.



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Sustainability requires an effort to re-examine who we are, why we are here and how we are connected to everything around us. Sustainability is not a fixed final state to be achieved, but a constant pursuit of what it truly means to be a human being living in an interconnected and complex world. It is a desirable future built not only on technological and material development but also on cultural, personal and spiritual growth. The Earth Charter advocates for this future, where human development will primarily focus on being more, not having more, recognizing that we are a human family and an Earth community with a shared destiny, responsible for each other, for the greater community of life and for future generations. To achieve this, we need to educate citizens with a deep sense of caring for the common good and the responsibility to contribute effectively to improving our societies [Earth Charter Commission, 2000].

I am convinced that the values to guide this change are the values articulated in the EC, which provide the perfect foundation for an ethical behaviour that respects human dignity and basic human rights, as well as the unique capacity of nature to sustain life. Respect, care, understanding, tolerance, compassion and love are the foundations of these values and principles, elevating us to the best of what we can be as humans. By adopting these values as our compass, we create the necessary space for the right questions to emerge and for us together, as an academic community, to elevate our vision to see new paths



collaboratively. The energy and strength that manifest in a group when we feel we are doing the right thing are what we need to create flourishing learning communities. And thus, the future we desire can unfold before us.

I hope that reading this article can inspire you to make the necessary changes to bring forth this future. There is no single recipe, and in fact, there is no recipe at all, but I carry with me some valuable lessons that I have tried to convey in this brief account. The Whole Institution Approach requires a shared and constant effort of engagement and deep listening. The advancements we achieved would not have been possible if the programme had been solely in the hands of a specialized department responsible for sustainability, nor would they have happened solely through the decision of the top leadership. It is a process that involves both top-down and bottom-up approaches, requiring attention, involvement, respect, reflection and constant co-creation to effect changes in the institutional culture. And for this, everyone needs to be gardeners, involving all segments and eliminating boundaries. Walking your talk is essential. Education is based on example and trust, and without living what we speak, we do not truly build anything. But what is truly fundamental is establishing common frameworks that can bring inspiration and create a strong sense of belonging to the group, while respecting the diversity and complexity of this world. For us, the EC was that common framework, and around it, we built a deep and beautiful experience that still marks the lives of everyone who participated in it.

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