

SUSTAINABILITY AS A STRATEGIC DRIVER AT VIU

Brief to VIU integrated planning teams

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INTRODUCTION

Humanity is at a turning point. Non-renewable energy resources are being depleted faster than new sources can be found. Nearly three quarters of the world's wild marine fisheries are considered overfished or fully fished. Climate change acceleration will severely impact human communities and natural ecosystems around the globe. Our Canadian ecological footprint (the sum of our energy and other resource consumption) indicates we are living as if there were three earths available to meet our needs. Something has to change.

Education and research in sustainability theory and practice are critical to creating an engaged and informed citizenry; and to fostering innovation that will both help us adapt to change and create new and better ways of living. Universities are places where education and research happen. Universities are also still largely place-based with big geographic footprints, and so allow opportunities for sustainable operations and campus development to be modeled as examples to the broader community.

Living sustainably on the earth is our individual and collective ethical obligation to future generations.

UNDERSTANDING SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainable development is: *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Our Common Future, 1987)*

Sustainability involves reconciliation of interrelated societal demands across four pillars: environmental, social, economic and cultural. Because the word sustainability has become ubiquitous, the concept is best described through a list of principles, or assessed against a set of measurable indicators, including ones like: energy, water, education levels, community wellbeing, etc. Existing university sustainability assessment frameworks propose metrics relevant in a university setting, but at the strategic level - sustainability in a university context involves two mutually reinforcing objectives:

- 1) Modeling a sustainable society on our campuses, and**
- 2) Advancing a sustainable society in the communities we serve, and around the world**

Modeling a sustainable society is largely operational and internally focused. It involves things like: reducing our carbon footprint, moving to zero waste management, facilitating transportation alternatives to single occupancy vehicle travel to and from campus, meeting our legislative and regulatory environmental, social and financial obligations, ensuring our University policies and

procedures provide a good governance framework for sustainable decision-making, providing for diversity in our university community, employee wellness, green building construction, etc.

Advancing a sustainable society in the communities we serve, and around the world is primarily strategic and outwardly focused. It is best described using key words, such as: community engagement, interdisciplinary programs, sustainability learning outcomes, research and innovation diffusion, university leadership, university-community partnerships, collaborative learning, capacity building, information exchange, environmental literacy, community wellbeing, best practices in stakeholder involvement, systems change, vision, etc.

(Indeed, these two objectives can truly be mutually reinforcing. For example, at UBC, the new CIRS (Centre for Integrative Research on Sustainability) building will be a showcase for teaching, research, incubation and commercialization of innovative green technology, at the same time exemplifying best practices in energy efficiency and in development of off-grid district energy systems within the campus.)
<http://www.cirs.ubc.ca/about/index.php>

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR VIU?

Vancouver Island University recognizes that the Government of British Columbia, the Ministry of Advanced Education, as well as regional districts and municipalities governing the communities we serve, have all identified the issue of sustainability as central to their goals and objectives.

VIU recognizes global leadership and guidance in defining and implementing sustainability, including from such key resources as the Bruntland Commission's *Our Common Future* (1987) and the *Earth Charter*.

The University understands that substantial progress has been made by the international higher education community in the development and implementation of policies and practices designed to define and support sustainability as one of the central social and educational issues of our time. In that regard, VIU has signed the 1990 Talloires Declaration committing VIU to "incorporating sustainability and environmental literacy in teaching, research, operations and outreach". VIU is also a member of both the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF) and the Association of Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE).

The University is at the forefront of sustainability threat and opportunity, in an island coastal community that has already seen the negative impacts of resource depletion on our regional economic wellbeing. We will continue to see additional future effects from climate change related demographic population shifts, and will also need to continue to innovate to diversify as traditional economies fade.

VIU is now at a key juncture in terms of creating a transformative vision for our institution that will allow us to play a leadership role in sustainability thinking and practice on Vancouver Island and around the world. The VIU integrated planning process offers a place to embed sustainability goals within our

University Plan that will guide education, research and practice. Sustainability goals and objectives are cross-cutting across our academic, regional engagement, enrollment, operational and other plans. As we continue the transition from Malaspina College to Vancouver Island University, this is the time to institutionalize sustainability as a key driver that will shape the thinking of students we educate, and secure the future of communities we serve.

The University's Visionary Goal (from the 2010 Vision Statement) states:

The University will be the trusted educational partner in the search for sustainable cultural, social, ecological, and economic prosperity on Vancouver Island and coastal British Columbia

We also have a VIU presidents level Sustainability Policy (44.14) in place which applies to the whole scope of activities governed by VIU, and states:

Vancouver Island University is committed to being a sustainability leader, in our operations, teaching, research and community engagement. This includes: implementing local and regional campus sustainability policies and practices; policies and practices that promote the sustainability of the adjacent community and bioregion; and policies and practices that advance sustainability of the general global environment.

In 2010, VIU created a Sustainability Office based on the Nanaimo Campus, and has committed staff and resources to meeting our provincial carbon-neutral obligations and also now to developing a comprehensive, broadly-supported sustainability program.

However, sustainability cannot afford to be seen as a niche area at VIU, nor purely operationally focused. It must be built foundationally into instructional and research programs which have significant influence in advancing a sustainable society amongst the communities we serve. It must also be a key, enabling factor in our regional engagement as a basis for building partnerships towards shared goals. VIU has made significant commitments to sustainability but success factors in achieving these commitments include:

- A common understanding of what sustainability is; and what it means in a university context
- A high level commitment to that common understanding
- A clear and agreed upon strategy for sustainability at VIU, including indicators, targets, timelines, policies and procedures
- Integration of both strategy and metrics across university departments/divisions/faculties that have interdependent governance relationships
- An engaged and active university community, including faculty, staff, students and external partners
- Resources and effort equal to the task

Other universities are marketing their sustainability commitments to students and faculty both as push and pull strategy. Many have created unique identifiers for themselves within specific sustainability niches. Most are deepening and broadening their sustainability programming and measuring their success against agreed-upon indicators and targets.

Our commitments to coastal communities, aboriginal people and also our international reach are already core values at VIU. The progressive, forward-looking transformative idea that binds these and other values we treasure is *sustainability*. If something is sustainable, it can continue forever.

The VIU Sustainability Office has resources and expertise available to assist and facilitate further discussion and work towards achievements in this area.