



# UT SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION

## CATALYSING INCLUSIVE PATHWAYS FOR CHANGE

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## SUMMARY

UT is at a pivotal moment to catalyse the many sustainability initiatives driven by the researchers, students, and support staff within the community. It is clear that we have the resources and interest to develop a pathway for sustainability at our university. Therefore, we ask the leaders of UT to further operationalise these initiatives with a set of practical steps. These require building structures and dedicating resources to supporting and enabling the sustainability transformation in the three areas of **research, education, and operations**. We propose the following steps:

- a) Adopt a **clear guiding definition of sustainability** transformation based upon an inclusive and ongoing dialogue with the community and best available science.
- b) Structure a **dialogue on research, education, and operations with relevant stakeholders** in the community to implement transformative change building upon the **definition** (a.) throughout the institution (co-developing benchmarks and meaningful inclusive indicators such as CO<sub>2</sub> emissions reductions and tenure-track sustainability hiring).
- c) Based on (b.), dedicate **resources to develop UT Green Position Paper and Formulating a Strategic Sustainability Transformation Plan to build infrastructure** (e.g., work groups) to facilitate the various bottom-up sustainability initiatives at UT.

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# 1. UT TODAY: SUSTAINABILITY HAS A PRESENCE BUT IT NEEDS FURTHER SUPPORT

**UT recognises the urgency of the climate crises based on the best scientific findings and in response has developed the document Shaping2030.**

UT's policy document recognises that "unsustainable ways of living have become the biggest threat to humanity" (Shaping2030 UT, p.13). UT's mission statement is that "we empower society through sustainable solutions" and "we aim for thriving and resilient communities, with an eye for innovation opportunities, with authoritative expertise, and with a keen sensitivity to society's needs. We provide sound, scientific guidance towards environmental, social and economic sustainability" (p. 9). UT thus acknowledges the necessity of implementing a sustainability transformation at UT by 2030. The 2030 vision affirms that "we consider sustainability to be a precondition for everything we do" (p. 13). In addition, various members of the UT community have made steps towards these goals as demonstrated by the development and implementation of the SEE-Programme and its operational sustainability policy, the institutionalisation of Green Hub Twente throughout UT, the development of various sustainability related courses, and the establishment of the Climate Centre.

**However, our current vision in Shaping 2030 fails to provide a coherent, operational definition of sustainability that could become the precondition of everything UT does in practice and outline pathways for the members in our community to empower sustainability transformation(s).**

There is a substantial gap between on the one hand the mission statement recognising the seriousness of the need to undergo sustainability transformation(s), and on the other hand the unnecessarily modest goals and commitments derived from these statements. This gap is not surprising, as a clear and concise definition of what sustainability means for UT, as well as a concrete operationalisation of sustainable practices and transformative, pathways are currently missing. The current personnel and organisational structures for education, research, and operations faculty and staff do not reinforce pathways for sustainability transitions. To realise the 2030 vision, it is necessary to crystallise sustainability conceptually and practically in the organisational culture and institutional structure of UT. Therefore, we propose that there is an opportunity for leadership to bridge this gap.

**UT has the potential to lead the way through Inclusive Leadership.**

We know UT has clear potential to set best practices regarding sustainability in the community at large. To unblock and augment this, UT's Green Hub, Design Lab, and University Innovation Fellows organised a series of Sustainability Dialogues from February to June 2023 to hear UT members' opinions, ideas, and experiences concerning sustainability and climate change. These dialogues have revealed **tensions** in the difficult conversations regarding collaboration with the fossil fuel industry, power asymmetries, economic practices, and changing ingrained mindsets. Despite this, the dialogues made a first step. Thus, we have an **opportunity** as a

community to generate innovative solutions to these complex problems by developing ethical and visionary democratic practices that are tied to research, education, and operations. Acting on this would be unique to UT, embracing its complexity while mitigating power asymmetries.

As an entrepreneurial university with technical excellence, we are getting **left behind when we could lead the way in sustainable transformation**. Other institutions are already taking steps. For example, VU has banned future collaborations with the fossil fuel industry not in line with the Paris 1.5°C target. Sustainability transitions mogul, Derk Loorbach, also advocates a moratorium approach for one year to reassess our sector's relationship with the fossil fuel industry. The gap is revealed by UT's mediocre position in the SustainaBul ranking, which puts the **reputation of UT at risk**. Additionally, as shown in the Sustainability Dialogues, our community of staff, students, and affiliated personnel have bigger ambitions and prove our community is willing to change even though there are disagreements. One point of convergence from the many perspectives shared during the Sustainability Dialogues is that 'sustainability' is a shared issue in which everyone, regardless of disciplinary background and degree of seniority can contribute to. In this sense, it is assumed that **sustainability is an ideal that can be achieved through interdisciplinarity and as a co-production process among students, staff members, and the wider community**. Another point of convergence notes how *sustainability should not be taught or understood as a concept isolated from the practices inside and outside of the university's classroom*. There is also a strong push to act upon principles of sustainability in UT's patterns of consumption, construction and dwelling, energy production, economy, and research directions. There is also a strong push to act upon principles of sustainability in UT's patterns of consumption, construction and dwelling, energy production, economy, and research directions.

As the Sustainability Dialogues have shown, **stakeholder engagement is necessary, as is inclusion of community members and recognition of power dynamics across the community and its impact on vulnerable members. It is important to resolve setbacks if disagreements arise regarding how to approach these solutions**. While steps have been taken towards developing dialogue on sustainability in our community, we propose that more explicit leadership is needed to bring our community together, since fragmentation and power asymmetries are still impediments to progress.

## 2. SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION AT UT: PROVIDING AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

The current Shaping2030 vision alone will not empower sustainability transformation at UT without further strategy development and investment in the people, practices and structures needed to do the work. Simply providing a new definition of sustainability will not address all problems. If that were the case, the Shaping2030 vision, and subsequent Shaping Expert Groups, would already have done so. Nonetheless, **without a working understanding of sustainability, we risk pursuing contradictory policies, avoidable disagreement and misunderstanding about what is meant by the term**, and undermining action towards shared goals. **The first step is hence to decide as a community what sustainability transformation at UT means** and what shape our sustainability transformation pathway should take.

Objectively speaking, it is clear that a transformation of our social, organisational, and economic systems, power relations, values and world views is needed for humanity to secure a sustainable and just world for all. For change to be truly transformative, it needs to address the systemic root causes that underlie the polycrisis of global inequity, biodiversity loss and climate change and put justice and equity centre stage to secure a sustainable future for all human and non-human life. Transformative change takes a pluralist approach inclusive of diverse actors in policy and society, world views, values, and knowledge systems that align with equity and justice. Transformative change is adaptive, facilitates learning and is able to mitigate unintended consequences. A common understanding of sustainability needs to be adopted by our entire community, and as the Shaping2030 vision states, 'be a precondition for everything we do'.

In line with these arguments, we suggest adopting an operational definition of sustainability transformation based on the framework of the Doughnut Economy and the concept of weak anthropocentrism as suggested by the current literature. Therefore, as a working definition, we propose:

**Sustainability transformation means equitable and just change** to empower all to achieve human and non-human wellbeing as defined by their respective social conventions and culture while moving back into safe and just planetary and local ecological boundaries. A sustainable university produces actionable knowledge and innovates in a way that promotes social equity and justice in recognition of ecological boundaries. Sustainability thus requires addressing challenges about how to live well in a socially just way within ecological limits.

Further, **sustainability transformation is a process of co-production**. To answer how UT wants to shape the world, and what future world it is striving to create, we need co-ownership of the problem, the problem-solving process, and the solution with stakeholders. As knowledge is also generated through action, the actions proposed in the forthcoming Green Paper can reshape the working sustainability definition over time.

### 3. NEXT STEPS: UT GREEN POSITION PAPER AND FORMULATING A STRATEGIC SUSTAINABILITY TRANSFORMATION PLAN

How does this translate into concrete steps for UT? There are several ways in which UT can take an exemplary leading role in putting this operational definition into practice. Recurring themes that emerged in the Sustainability Dialogues that we find formative in any co-created definition are that sustainability is not something that is only taught and researched but should be implemented on campus practically. This process requires urgency, therefore, a **UT green position paper** is in preparation in collaboration between Green Hub Twente, UT's Strategic Sustainability Coordinator, sustainability experts from BMS, ET, and ITC faculties, and the Sustainability and the Environmental Policy Officer of CFM. The green position paper embeds the proposed definition of sustainability definition into the wider sustainability landscape, supports this analysis with scientific literature, provides a normative justification, and contains detailed suggestions for **further concrete steps** UT can implement. These steps cover the whole range of activity at UT, from research, through education to operations, community, and the potential interrelationships between these aspects. We would like to request that a **formal task force is created with the necessary resources to develop this plan** which is based on the latest scientific evidence on ecological crises, and aims at **building a solid foundation for sustainability transformation at UT**. In the green paper, **we will suggest concrete opportunities for taking leadership on sustainability transitions** in the following areas:

- **Research:** Adopting a challenge-based approach to research where planetary boundaries are seen as constraints that spark our creativity in consultation with communities; creating spaces for and promoting inter- and transdisciplinary research and collaboration; producing actionable knowledge that creates impact; developing training programs on research integrity based on climate-relevant code of ethics; allocating strategic funding to underfunded humanities and social science research; and minimising material throughput of research activities.
- **Teaching:** Preparing students to become the transformative change agents needed to address the polycrisis in a socially just way; establishing world-leading sustainability and climate courses based on the UT signature sustainability definition; highlighting disciplinary roles in the societal sustainability transformation; enabling life-long learning for all including training for UT staff; and establishing a public engagement unit.
- **Operations:** minimising environmental impacts in a socially responsible way; maximise biodiversity and ecosystem services on campus; and increasing support for these initiatives within operations.

To this end, organisational structures are needed to establish mandated working groups that have autonomy over their budgets and can oversee and facilitate the implementation of coherent sustainability pathways across the institution. Sustainability experts from various backgrounds are ready to take on the task of implementing the sustainability transformation at UT if given the mandate. If we do it together, we can catalyse inclusive pathways for change.



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