

# Sustainability

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## 1. Key Word

Sustainability is probably the keyword when it comes to the future of our planet but also as far as the university is concerned. It has shown itself to be sustainable, with ups and downs. Founded in 1425, it is one of the oldest institutions in the country and is even older than the country itself. Nowadays, sustainability is a space where the many lines of our life and thought come together. These involve issues of climate and energy, but at a deeper level they are also about justice and peace. Ultimately all of this concerns a vision of things in which humans are central and not just greedy consumers who are exhausting the earth. Neither legislators who merely demand strict rules rather than content but human beings who, if we are not estranged from ourselves, feel responsible for the environment in which we live, who have respect for those around us, realizing that we are only here for a brief time on earth. Sustainability involves choosing a future that is other than the seemingly inevitable.

At the beginning of our policy period in 2013, sustainability became an independent domain in the university policy and was given its own Vice Rector. Since then we have taken important steps in highlighting priorities but also to broaden the scope of the university's sustainability policy. We have drawn up a framework in which the feasibility of measures can be realistically estimated and in which space has been made to carry them out. We have drawn up measures to embed sustainability in the university's core tasks. Of course, for the next four years, sustainability will remain a transversal area of policy with its own Vice Rector and a new sustainability policy framework will be drawn up in cooperation with other sections.

At the same time, we have laid the foundations for an organizational and material framework to ensure the university's sustainability policy. In this respect, we have set up new structures such as the Sustainability Council, the Sustainable Education Network and a number of feedback groups. Eco-teams have been set up in the faculties. We will strengthen this framework and made the necessary resources available to further develop it. We will also engage with a multi-campus model for sustainability, including sustainability promoters and a contact person for each campus.

The newly founded Sustainability Office will be further developed and strengthened. This service has been housed in the beautiful Black Sisters Convent. The convent also houses the Green Office, which was conceived as a supported student initiative, a laboratory for the future in which all sorts of different projects can be tried out freely and easily. The Green Office obtains further support for its work from the other campuses. Next to this we have the Sustainability Incubator in the Ateliers Vermeylen in the Minderbroedersstraat and the 'Stiltehuis' (House of Silence) in Egenhoven. The Stiltehuis (formerly known as the Josephite Estate and originally the House of the Jesuits) is open six months of the year as a summer house. Members of the university can book the conference rooms there or single rooms for reflection. We will try in the future to keep the 'Stiltehuis' open all year round and to do so, we will have to carry out ecologically sound building work.

## 2. A Policy of Sustainability and Climate Neutrality

In my 2013 programme, I made a plea for the notion of a ‘Sustainable University’. To be attributed the label ‘Sustainable University’ in the broader more essential sense of the term, one basic condition is required, i.e. that we reach through a sustained effort a state of climate neutrality and environmental sustainability. KU Leuven therefore has an obligation towards itself to serve as an example for others in its own policy.

All efforts in relation to sustainability in our policy will be further intensified in cooperation with the technical services. We will take into full consideration the recommendations of the Sustainability Council when drawing up the new energy policy plan. We will make all renovations to buildings maximally sustainable. We are working on a global vision regarding sustainability and our patrimony and will ensure that all new construction projects will be climate neutral. In this we remain open to suggestions from members of the university community. A recent example is the new car park planned to replace the old car park at Imec and KU Leuven on the Arenberg campus. Plans already existed for a much larger car park in 2013 when we began our policy term. Following positive dialogues with Imec during an initial phase, the size of the car park was considerably reduced. Following efforts by alert colleagues, the new plan was adapted and transformed into a climate neutral project. At the same time, all efforts in relation to higher accessibility to the campus by bike and public transport will be the result of clear structural agreements in dialogue with Imec. A climate neutral car park: that sounds paradoxical. But the debate and solutions found are part of an awareness raising process in which KU Leuven plays a leading role. This all helps us considerably in the search for a broad consensus regarding a truly ‘sustainable’ sustainability policy.

The same thought processes are involved in further raising the awareness of all members of the university community and rendering them responsible for a more conscious use of energy. We should set an example in terms of the energy efficient management of our own boarding houses and together with local government bodies encourage a move to energy-efficient rentals on the private market.

At this very moment, we are drawing on academic expertise in developing high-quality sustainable green spaces on all our campuses in Flanders: which plants and trees should be planted where, how and why? This is an important task assignment and not just a simple task to be carried out. The policy of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana is a leading light in this respect. We are carrying out the points drawn up in the Green Plan and are in close consultation with the Green Feedback Group from the outset for all new projects and works and are also working on creating sustainability elements for new construction works. The first case in point is a review of the master plan for the Arenberg Campus, which will be carried out on a participatory basis and will pay much attention to green spaces and sustainability.

In terms of mobility, we will continue to build on the study conducted by *Transport & Mobility Leuven*. We are committed to a creative reduction in the demand for mobility and particularly in a reduction in home-to-work transport by car. This matter has various facets, working from home being one option. At the same time, we are taking measures to make electric bicycles more attractive, facilitate shared transport and to promote the use of public transport. We are drawing up a travel policy in which sustainable alternatives such as teleconferencing was brought into focus. We are informing people and raising their awareness especially when air travel is involved.

Further steps need to be taken to realistically integrate elements of sustainability into KU Leuven’s purchasing policy. To do so, we have adapted our policy to the principles of a circular economy. The

university will also include sustainability criteria in its new framework agreements. We must also pursue a coordinated policy in relation to the printing of reports, dissertations and publications. But we will always have to view the circumstances and opt for a facilitating and encouraging rather than an authoritarian policy.

Measures to be taken for the promotion of healthy and sustainable food in our student restaurants and internal catering form another point of attention. We wish to make a conscious effort to expand the assortment of fair-trade products and other produce from sustainable farming. We will include demands regarding *sustainability* in agreements with Alma and other suppliers.

More attention will be paid to a sustainable approach to the problem of waste disposal through a system of far-reaching communication and awareness and further sustainability in waste collection and processing.

### 3. Influence on the Outside World

Pursuing a sustainability policy means that KU Leuven will play a leading role in drawing up a vision for the future and in bringing the broader university community together to address the theme of sustainability. The future lies in creating a world that is as balanced as possible, a world that we can contribute to through our teaching and research. Development and welfare, health, peace and justice all form a priority; at the same time, hunger, fear, violence and poverty all need to be addressed as efficiently as possible, without putting the future of the world in danger.

Next to being an important concern as far as the environment is concerned, sustainability means concern for the wellbeing of the present and future generations in terms of health, education, social justice and gender balance, both here and elsewhere. Our sustainability policy must therefore rely on a basic philosophy that will allow sustainability to be achieved in all its aspects. This means bringing together philosophy, economics, technology, ecology, gender, poverty prevention and much more, both locally and regionally, both nationally and internationally.

In this respect, the university has a tremendous responsibility when it comes to drawing up its investment portfolio. Direct participation in companies involved in mining and processing fossil fuels is no longer acceptable and will to be ended. Moreover, KU Leuven must subject its transactions with investment funds to consistent checks in relation to sustainability. To conclude, we should examine how the university can trace companies through its investments who are making special efforts in terms of reconversion and sustainability. A fine-grained approach will be needed. Dissertations and projects can be used to discover which energy suppliers are making efforts in the direction of sustainability and hence deserve our support, also through our investment portfolio.

Sustainability policy has a certain vision on development as its point of departure. The Interfaculty Council for Development Cooperation (Interfacultaire Raad voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking, IRO) is very well placed to provide an answer to the challenges posed by sustainable development. Therefore, the awareness that university development cooperation would be an ideal way of giving shape to international sustainability should be given more credence. We will give more prominence to elements of sustainability in development cooperation and in internationalisation. We will also valorise the experiences and networks that we have built up through cooperation with our partners in the South.

## 4. Sustainability and Interdisciplinarity in Research and Education

A sustainable and therefore climate neutral society needs both applied research on sustainability and fundamental research for sustainability. Taken together, both forms of research lead to 'sustainable research'. Research for sustainability is characterized by its integrated approach not only across disciplines: science and policy have to be brought together. We need both forms of research concerning sustainability. The development of scientific knowledge for sustainability is essential for solving complex social problems, such as climate change, epidemics, the unjust distribution of wealth and the future of democracy. Problem areas and bottlenecks often arise because of the way science is usually practiced, i.e. in research groups belonging to separate disciplines. That is why the bonus awarded to interdisciplinarity should be maintained and even strengthened. Research projects concerning complex sustainability problems deserve to be supported. The *Leuven Sustainable Earth Research Centre* can play an important role in this respect. Achievements in relation to sustainability are brought into consideration in evaluations of appointment and promotion applications.

In terms of education, a distinction can be made between training on sustainability (which focuses on content and the technical side) and training for sustainability (which focuses on methodology and didactics). Both approaches shore up sustainability education at the university. Each has their place in the various education curricula and in COBRA, our quality control method. We will continue to build on the support and professionalization training for lecturers in relation to sustainable education. The Sustainable Education Network (Netwerk Duurzaam Onderwijs), which plays a central role in this, will be further expanded and supported. To conclude, we plan to set up a university-wide programme committee with a view to developing interdisciplinary courses, particularly on and for sustainability.

## 5. Sustainability and Human Relations

A university that intends to achieve sustainability, also wishes to do so for people. Quality of life, of work and of human relations are therefore important.

That is why we should turn our attention to sustainability in staff and student policy. Sound staff policy implies investing in the resilience and continuity of services but also in overall quality of life and satisfaction among staff members. Despite the positive results emerging from the satisfaction survey, KU Leuven still must pursue a more targeted, coherent and structured policy to promote the psychosocial wellbeing of staff and students and to spot and alleviate problems at an early stage. We must also further develop existing initiatives and make them better, creating a low threshold being essential.

A broader framework for future KU Leuven initiatives in relation to sustainability is formed by the SDGs or *Sustainable Development Goals*, as set out by the United Nations in 17 sub-domains. KU Leuven must play a leading role in achieving these goals. But we should do so in our own authentic way, not by making empty declarations but through continuous, concrete step-by-step achievement that goes further than just ticking off lists. We must strive for true ownership. These SDGs will never be completed. They must in turn lead us to sustainable reflection and effort. For this reason, cross connections are being drawn between the Sustainability Council, the IRO and the Academic Senate. If the SDGs wish to be more than just declarations of principle, then we will have to take an integrated approach, full of ambition and with concrete plans.

It is important that KU Leuven reports openly and regularly – every two years in principle – on the results and assures that its sustainability policy is pursued in a scientifically grounded way. This will be carried out initially in accordance with concrete goals that are specific to the institution, which in turn will be placed alongside other initiatives taken in the community. We can also draw further inspiration from other frames of reference such as the GRI (*Global Reporting Initiative*). A true sustainability policy leaves room for each person's related individual steps and initiatives. Sustainability can never be a sort of external demand; it will remain an empty and futureless concept if it does not come from within, from the heart.