



Situational Analysis



Sustainable Development in Education at Örebro University – April 2022

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Assignment

Hanna Kjell was assigned to conduct a situational analysis of the work on sustainable development in education at Örebro University during her placement at the Centre for Academic Development and the Platform for a Sustainable Future PSF@ORU between 28 March 2022 and 26 April 2022. The assignment included identifying good examples and challenges faced. The report was anticipated to be used as a basis for discussion as well as a starting point for future development work.

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Forward

I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the warm welcome from everyone I met during my brief work placement at Örebro University. I especially want to thank my supervisors Katarina Bååth, Felicia Garcia, Ingrid Ericson Jogsten and Johanna Björklund. Thank you for the confidence and academic freedom I received taking on this assignment.

I would also like to thank the heads of schools who helped me get in touch with the heads of the programme. Finally, I would like to extend a big thank you to the eight heads of the programme who took time out of their busy schedules to participate in the interviews. Your determination to integrate sustainable development into education at Örebro University has taught me a great deal and given me new ideas and inspiration.

Since this report was written and developed during my brief work placement, it was necessary to put aside many exciting topics for the sake of the whole.

Introduction

Örebro University, like other universities, faces challenges in teaching sustainable development. In accordance with Chapter 1, Section 5 of the Higher Education Act.

“In the course of their operations, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice.”¹

Meeting the 1.5°C target of the Paris Agreement and adhering to the Climate Framework signed by Örebro University are significant challenges that have become increasingly pressing. The university’s vision and strategic objectives (2018–2022) state that “the university will be a sought-after and dedicated player in society that, together with others, promotes action in support of the global goals for sustainable development.”² For a university seeking to stimulate growth, it should strive not only to meet legal obligations but also to spearhead this transformation regarding how all education should promote sustainable development.

According to Örebro University’s guidelines in its Action Plan and Strategy for Sustainable Development, sustainable development should be clearly defined in new programme syllabuses. “Sustainable development is [to be] systematically integrated into new programme syllabuses starting 2020.”³

Note: Örebro University’s Action Plan and Strategy for Sustainable Development 2023-2025 has been revised and published in 2023.⁴

The environmental investigation⁵ conducted at Örebro University in 2020 highlights integrating environmental issues into education as one of the university’s most significant environmental aspects. (p. 27). This investigation shows that there are explicit goals in its environmental work but shortcomings in the follow-up work in several areas. (p. 3) “The integration of sustainable development into education is also the area that has engaged the most interview participants. There is a consensus among interviewed employees and students that this issue should be prioritised in the university’s continued sustainability work.” (p. 27)

The environmental investigation also presents the following proposal for improvements: “In light of the university’s ambitious goal in its sustainability strategy, stating that sustainable development should be systematically integrated into existing education by 2022, management should prioritise following up on whether this goal is possible to achieve.” (p.29).

Research published at the University of Gävle raises the following: “Teaching sustainability at universities around the world focuses on content but fails to develop the sustainability skills in students that are critical in the field of sustainability.”⁶ Integrating sustainable development in education means adapting the content of knowledge and promoting teaching and learning that can provide students with the sustainability skills to address complex challenges.

Goal

This project's goal is to investigate and provide further analysis to Örebro University as a basis for continued training on integrating sustainable development in education. The purpose is to analyse patterns regarding organisation, follow-up, and systematics to identify good examples and opportunities for development.

Method

A mixed method was used. The first was based on a quantitative analysis of current curriculums. This involved reviewing how often specific value-laden words connected to sustainable development are mentioned. The analysis was supported with interviews to supplement this part and ensure more thoughtful, nuanced conclusions.

Terms in programme syllabuses

Programme syllabuses were retrieved from Örebro University's website, where the most recently published version of the programme syllabuses was selected⁷ and result in 77 programme syllabuses.

The quantitative part consisted of simply counting how often selected terms were mentioned in the syllabus text to identify what was specifically mentioned in the syllabuses. The terms *equality*, *gender*, and *sex* were initially selected based on gender mainstreaming.⁸ *Sustainable development* and *sustainability* were selected due to legal requirements and their vital importance for social development.⁹ Other terms (see Figure 1) that have other relevant values for Örebro University have also been detailed in this report. The terms were then counted and summarised in *Appendix 1 Terms – Programme Syllabuses*.

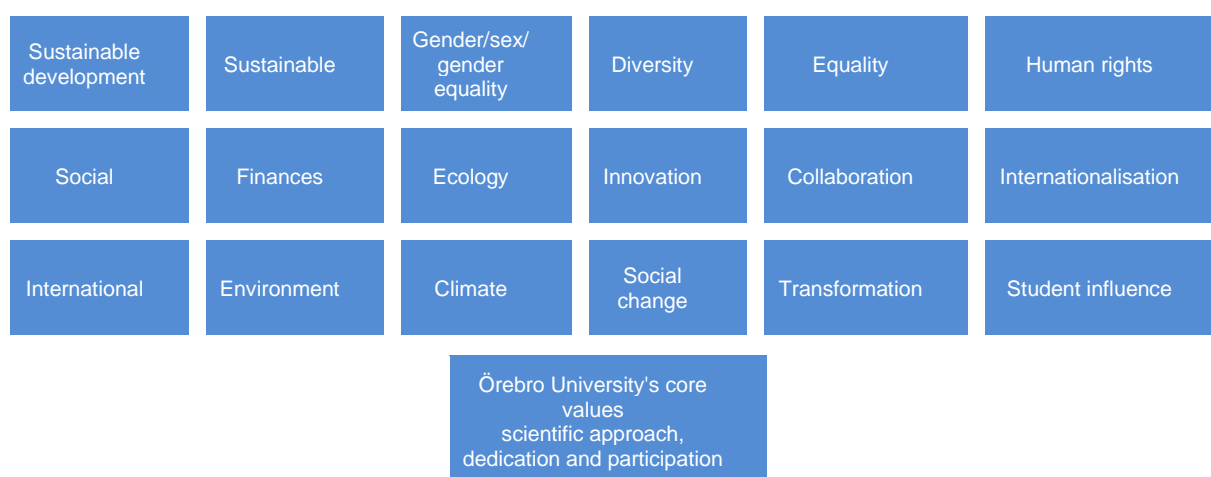


Figure 1: Value-laden words that were counted.

Interviews

Eight qualitative interviews were conducted with programme managers, one per school. Interviews dealt with how the schools organised, monitored, and systematised sustainable development. The interviews were a sample of the operations to capture experiences on how work functions.

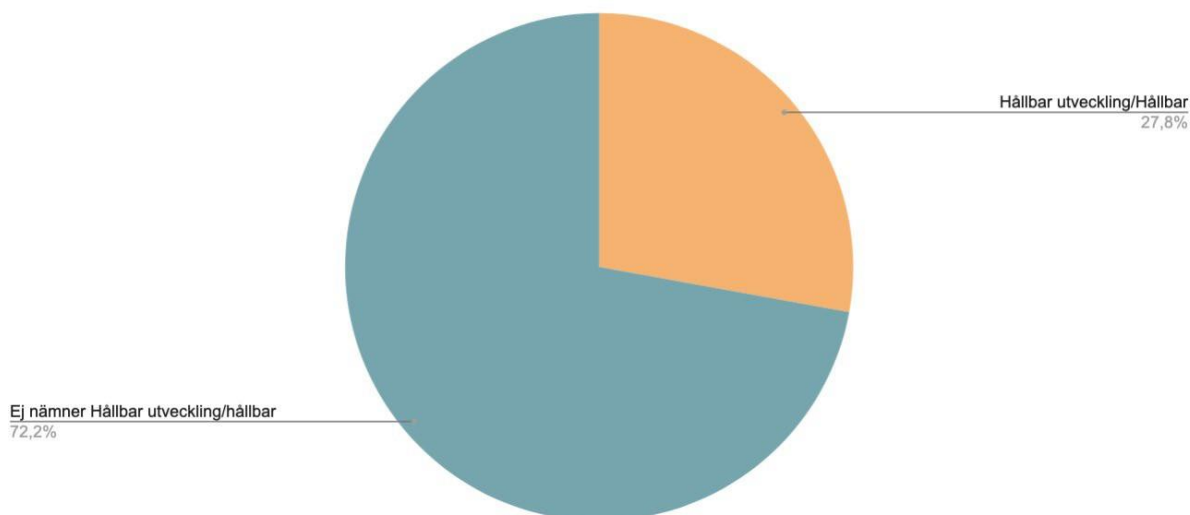
The format was semi-structured interviews where some detailed topics were covered, so the respondent had the opportunity to direct the conversation and thus were given the chance to contribute freely with their insights and experiences. The interview questions are available as support in *Appendix 2 – Interview questions*. Interviews took about an hour.

Results

Terms in programme syllabuses

According to the analysis, 27.8% of schools mentioned *sustainable development* or *sustainability* in their programme syllabuses. Figure 1 illustrates this in percentages, and Appendix 1 shows which programmes mentioned these terms.

Procentuell beskrivning av antal program som uttryckligen nämner "Hållbar utveckling/hållbar" i utbildningsplaner



No mention of Sustainable development/sustainable 72.2%

Sustainable development/sustainable 27.8%

Diagram 1, Percentage of schools that mentioned sustainable development/sustainability in their programme syllabuses.

Interviews

The results from the interviews are built upon those topics expressed by the respondents. Topics raised by two or more respondents and topics considered relevant to development work are presented below. These topics are divided into the following categories: *challenges*, *good experiences/examples* and *others*. As many topics overlap, some comments may repeat, while others complement each other.

Challenges

Time constraints	Corona pandemic	Loneliness	A diversity in approaches	Individual/group dependency	Difficulties in some subjects
Lack of expertise in sustainable development	Lots to fit in	"Can't do it everything"	Stress	Sustainable students	Legislation
Greenwashing	Labour market	Definitions and language use	Making sustainability visible	"get it done as we conceived it in theory"	Literature
	Structural challenges	A continuous process	Complexity	Volunteer work	

Figure 2, Summary of topics posing a challenge to sustainable development.

Time constraints

Most respondents raised time constraints as a factor explaining why integrating sustainability was not being implemented or developed optimally. Time constraints were also raised as a reason why specific development work was initiated but not completed to a desirable extent or not completed at all due to a lack of time. Four of the respondents raised time constraints as the most significant challenge. Four of the respondents considered time constraints to be the biggest challenge. Two respondents expressed the problem that various work tasks compete for time.

"It's stimulating, and you want to work on it. At the same time, twenty other puzzle pieces also require a lot of time. So, just putting out fires is probably the biggest challenge."

"At this school, it conflicts with many other things you must do. It's easy to prioritise other things like planning courses, creating schedules in KronoX, Blackboard, Ladok, lectures, or the more practical things. When it gets too much, you must prioritise between what is important and what is less important. It's not unimportant, but less important in that situation. Because of this, I wish I had more time since now it's so important. There is the overreaching university goal and the school's goal as well. It's not something you just chip it in. It takes time and requires a strategy for it to land right."

“It’s a shame. We have a good programme on paper, but the prerequisites aren’t there.”

“A dedicated time slot needs to be set aside to learn more about the university’s sustainable work.”

Corona pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was raised as a reason why work proceeded slower than desired.

No quotes are cited here.

Loneliness

Several respondents reported feeling like they were the only ones advancing this work. To address this, they suggested developing more cooperative groups and partnerships.

One respondent described one of the most challenging aspects of this work: “Finding a group and not feeling alone is difficult. That’s how I feel in general. You’re very much on your own at a university, at least at my school.”

Independent work was described as positive because it provides academic freedom, but it was also noted that it could make collaborating with colleagues a challenge. This is especially true if many people work from other locations or do not have full-time position, making it more difficult to have conversations that can lead to development.

A diversity in approaches

Two respondents identified a problem with the fact that this work is done in different ways, making it difficult to guarantee consistency. They proposed developing virtual course plans and explicit goal matrices to become more aligned and have a distinct system within work teams.

“We often encounter roadblocks. We’re part of the whole, so everyone needs to be on board. But everyone does things so differently.”

“There are many challenges out there. It doesn’t matter how enthusiastic my three closest colleagues and I are. Our enthusiasm raises the possibility that we burn out if we try to shoulder the entire burden. We must collaborate to get everyone on board [...] we have to trust one another.”

“Mobilising everyone for a unified approach is challenging, not just for sustainable development.”

Individual/group dependency

Several respondents expressed the challenge that work depends on one person or a small group. The vulnerability described was that the work is at risk if one or more people quit. Some respondents suggested a solution could be a more systematic approach and guidelines.

“In courses, it doesn’t matter how passionate you are about finding connections to the subject, as it depends on an individual. [...] Of course, if it’s clearly linked, properly written into the governing documents, like the course syllabus and so on, it’s another thing. But then it’s all about how teams are put together and who helps in the right way. It’s a challenge.”

Difficulties in some subjects

Several respondents expressed that it was more difficult in some subjects. These subjects were described as having a less tangible link to sustainable development and thus required more time for the connection to be developed. It was said that, in some cases, it was more difficult in more practical courses and that it was easier to integrate sustainable development into theoretical courses.

Other programmes meant that, in general, they had an easier time linking their subjects to sustainable development. Still, there was a wide variation among respondents in this opinion.

Lack of expertise in sustainable development

Half of the respondents raised the issue of expertise regarding sustainable development and the integration of sustainability in education. A fear of falling behind students who come out of secondary school and already have a fundamental understanding of sustainable development was expressed. Awareness among students was viewed as stimulation to development. Some respondents expressed a need for support in specific areas, such as sustainable economy, climate, and environmental issues, where they felt they lack sufficient knowledge. Respondents suggested proposals for additional interdisciplinary subjects and collaborations as a potential solution.

“...know very little.”

“We have to be careful that we don’t fall behind. They’ve already come along a bit in secondary school. We need to avoid the situation where our introductory course only takes up the obvious for the target group, but which may not be as obvious for us. [...] Even some companies have come a long way, so when our students come to us, I think they’ve got high expectations. Living up to that could be a challenge.”

“For sure, there are time constraints. But even if we have an extremely knowledgeable staff – there’s no organisation in Sweden with so much knowledge as universities – but regarding sustainability, I’m not sure everyone is equally skilled.”

Lots to fit in

Most respondents pointed out that every programme was limited to a certain number of credits and that if something new was to be included, in many cases, that meant something else had to be left out. At the same time, the programme-specific subjects must have enough allotted space so students can meet the expectations of the labour market.

“There’s a lot of other stuff competing for that space in a course.”

“How much can you integrate without disrupting the core?”

“Of course, courses can collaborate, where [sustainability] comes in. Together with other student groups and in interdisciplinary subject teaching teams, you could put together a course. [...] At the same time, there isn't much room over for adding something else within a programme, so it's a delicate balancing act. How much room [in a course] can you take? Integration is crucial and allows the subject to have its questions.”

“Can't do everything”

Most respondents expressed challenges with prioritising and achieving everything, but that not everything could or was even possible to do. They described many ideas but struggled to fit them all in.

“It's inspirational, but still, you have to consider what of all these things we can actually do.”

“Can't do everything.”

“You're expected to do a lot, but there's not enough time for everything.”

“You need to be constantly prioritising.”

Stress

Stress is heightened by yet another task that has to be done in an already demanding job and from the anxiety about the importance of the subject. This can lead to feelings of inadequacy regarding what was done and what was not done. Some respondents linked integrating sustainability in education with stress, potentially causing reluctance within some workgroups. Frustration and reluctance to exceed current efforts are also mentioned. Some described a feeling of not being able to handle these anxiety-laden issues even at work. The Centre for Academic Development's films were mentioned as a good example of fitting continued professional development into stressful work situations.

“When this question comes up, I see that many teachers feel overwhelmed. It's paradoxical because I believe all my colleagues are personally deeply committed to sustainability, but in practice, in their professional roles, it causes a lot of stress and anxiety.”

“When I see people struggling, I don't know how much more you can push them.”

Sustainable students

Mental health was brought up as a factor that needs to be addressed when teaching sustainability. One respondent particularly mentioned climate anxiety as an aspect to consider.

“This is something new [...] mental health in education. We're losing students when they drop out and do something else. Before, you either finished or dropped out. Now you're blocked and can't finish because of that.”

Legislation

Sustainable development is not mentioned in some programmes' national examination goals. This means that local examination goals must be adapted if the requirements stated in the action plan and strategy¹⁰ are to be met. Respondents raised that disparity exists between the Higher Education Act, Chapter 1, Section 5¹¹ and the programme-specific examination goals governed by the Higher Education Ordinance. Questions about whether the university intends to add local examination goals related to sustainable development were raised. However, if they are put into effect alongside the steering documents, these goals risk not being reached, which creates confusion.

“What can be done now, of course, is to add local goal achievement on sustainable development.”

“If it's talked about in the programme syllabus, then it's a priority.”

“This confuses me and many colleagues because [...] we think about the examination goals that the government has decided on. That's where our goal achievement and our obligations lie. But when things come alongside the programme, it's no longer being governed by the programme syllabus or the Higher Education Ordinance, but instead, we're doing it in some way.”

Greenwashing

Two respondents raised the importance of not saying that more was being done than in sustainable development to avoid greenwashing. As some industries are described as using greenwashing, it was considered especially relevant to address this in education on sustainable development. It was also expressed as a key challenge to ensure that sustainable development does not become a buzzword only used at a policy level.

Labour market

Respondents focused heavily on the sustainable development knowledge and skills students are expected to possess when entering the labour market. Many believe that their students' working lives will be influenced by sustainable development. There were also difficulties in getting external mentors to participate at workplaces during students' work placement schemes to incorporate sustainability aspects, and mentors did not always know what to do, what was expected of them or how they could incorporate sustainability. Many respondents also raised the importance of their programme working for sustainable development. Several respondents described the role that their subject's responsibility can place in sustainable development.

One respondent described short-term concerns about how industries will welcome sustainability-related skills, as they could sometimes contradict other important requirements and norms they were striving towards. In the long term, incorporating sustainability perspectives in everything was considered something to be assumed as well as a selling point. Any problems were assumed only to be short-term, as sustainability will have an

impact further ahead.

“Our study programmes must gain legitimacy within the industry [...] a degree with lots of words that the industry doesn’t value, risks losing legitimacy.”

“There’s internal resistance to assuming social responsibility within the industry. A gap between us and industry that probably exists in all dimensions of sustainability.”

Definitions and language use

Two respondents brought up issues regarding word choice and the concepts that should be used. For example, a course syllabus may use the word social sustainability, but it may not be the working term that will come to be used. Instead, the focus should be on equality or diversity.

Respondents also expressed that courses vary in length and scope, which should be considered. A longer course has a better opportunity to incorporate sustainability perspectives, while shorter courses are perceived as having less space to do so. To address this, it is necessary to reconsider how requirements for integrating sustainability are expressed in all future courses.

“There are differences between programmes. For those working with the overarching perspective of education, it can be significant how goals and strategies are expressed, for example, when stating that all courses should contain a particular perspective.”

“If it says that it should be in all courses, then that’s what it means. However, it might mean it should be well-established and ongoing within a programme. A course may not mean the same thing between different schools. [...] Keep in mind that different traditions can require formulating them in different ways to reach the same end. Both when you study something and when creating instructions on it.”

Making sustainability visible

Respondents feel that more was being done to integrate sustainability than in follow-up reports and programme syllabuses. For example, including a goal in a course syllabus must have an exam requirement. This may lead to goals being written in general terms, making them too broad or being excluded.

“Another challenge, although not difficult, is probably something that hasn’t been done enough. Make those topics we’ve covered more visible since much of what we do is one piece of a whole puzzle.”

“Even if it’s not in the course syllabus, we know that we throw in various sustainability-related cases.”

“...get it done as we conceived it in theory...”

Many respondents expressed that there were several plans for what was supposed to be done and that the challenge was in implementing what was planned.

“The first challenge is to get it done as we conceived it in theory. Because in academia, theory and practice tend to be different things. So that we follow up and follow the virtual course syllabus, get the room [in the course] we want – and that we’re expected and requested to give it.”

Literature

Respondents described literature dealing with both the subject at hand and sustainable development as problematic.

“We can’t just replace the literature altogether... because if it’s mathematics, then it’s got be mathematics. The challenges lie in finding literature or articles that deal with the subject matter covered in this course while at the same time linked to sustainable development.”

Structural challenges

How interdisciplinary collaborations are financed was described as an obstacle. Collaborating between schools was also described as challenging and an obstacle to the interdisciplinary collaboration necessary to promote sustainable education.

In many cases, work on sustainable development was described as coming from below, while the groups higher up in their divisions were viewed as far from practical work.

“Making interdisciplinary collaborations possible is a huge challenge, without being caught up in structural issues like how the financing is allocated and how the budget looks.”

A continuous process

Several respondents described the need for a continuous process to address, among other things, the dependency on individuals but also to establish sustainability as a natural part of the agenda.

“The challenge is that we’ve said it, but it’s not passed on as an ongoing development. What’s key is that it’s put in the course syllabus somehow. Even if one teacher is committed, another teacher who takes over must also understand what is being covered.”

Complexity

The majority of respondents raised that there were difficulties in addressing the complexity of sustainable development. One respondent pointed out that learning to work with complexity is the next step.

“Sustainable development is almost always brought up, but because it’s a broad and complex

matter, there are many angles. Which angle you choose depends on the area you focus on.”

Volunteer work

Three respondents pointed out that they had worked voluntarily on sustainable development, either with development work or interdisciplinary collaborations, when their regular time had not been enough.

Good examples and experiences

Centre for Academic Development	Good dialogue	Working in groups	Study programme advisory council	Sustainable skills and pedagogy
A systematic approach	Organisation and participation	Highlighting existing good practices	Collegial consensus	Recently updated study programmes
Workshop, review and a living document	Virtual course syllabus	Student conferences	Collaboration between HEIs	Interdisciplinary collaboration

Figure 3, Summary of good examples and experiences.

Centre for Academic Development

Seven out of eight respondents reported positive experiences with the Centre for Academic Development’s support materials on sustainable development. Most know that support was available, but not everyone had sought it, partly due to time constraints. More allocated time and clearer guidance from above were desired to utilise this support fully. For example, someone who follows up and reminds teachers that courses are available and that they should take them. More support within specific subjects was also preferred. Among respondents who had come further in their work appreciated the support made available as a good channel for new teachers. Many emphasised the benefits of collaboration and meetings with others who faced similar challenges. More subject-specific material and interdisciplinary collaborations were wanted.

“The level of competence in these specific areas could be addressed by taking a university course in pedagogy, but we don’t have time... that’s just the way it is.

“The course was good and helped unite like-minded people.”

“I’m tremendously satisfied with everything the Centre for Academic Development does. They’re a fantastic resource for everything, including sustainability. [...] I’m convinced I’ll receive useful support if I contact the Centre for Academic Development.”

“Everything I’ve been missing. I’ve found answers to or a platform where I find answers! The Centre for Academic Development staff visited us, and they’ve been very helpful and

incredibly quick to respond. We've never had to wait. They've always been there."

Good dialogue

A smaller programme provided good dialogue between teachers and students, which was perceived as better in promoting work on sustainable development.

Working in groups

Respondents reported positive collaboration experiences, especially when inviting students to discussions about sustainable development in, for example, study programme advisory councils. Having doctoral students interested in sustainable development characterises and furthers this work.

"Students have a lot to contribute."

"Overall, working in a group and brainstorming gave us a lot after just a few minutes, tonnes of ideas. Before, I felt alone in this work. So I turned to the advisory council, you know, for advice. Turning to students and teachers for help was very fruitful. So, my best advice is to ask students!"

"Remember, everyone else has ideas, too."

Study programme advisory council

Several respondents identified study programme advisory councils as a good forum but that it was problematic to attract students to them.

Sustainable skills and pedagogy

Creating change agents with good knowledge of sustainable skills based on case methodology, key competence in PBL (problem-based learning) and problem-solving was considered important by several respondents. A good example was working in groups similar to PBL groups to solve complex questions.

"Here, sustainability is something you should understand. [...] No matter what you take on in the future, you need to have it with you. I hope and believe that the students will grasp sustainability to the extent that they can master the craft."

"Connecting to theoretical knowledge and shaping it into something practical is a way to develop knowledge and create the ability to work with it. There you have it, a well-developed pedagogy."

"If it's possible to adapt the teaching methods, you can get it everywhere."

"Moving away from cramming things... because everyone should have time to think... and get back to the old university with thinking freely. It's unfortunate to hear, "What do we have to know?" I hope to avoid hearing that question. We are here because we want to learn."

Encourage curiosity, don't extinguish it. And pay it forward!"

"Everything is connected. And we need to get our students to understand that."

A systematic approach

Several respondents advocated for a systematic approach to sustainable development, as it was viewed as a critical counterweight to the risk of personal dependence. Three respondents described that there was no specific organisation within their programme to work with sustainable development systematically. They described that the work occurred informally or as part of ordinary development work. Several respondents believed that sustainable development should not have a separate follow-up but should be part of ordinary work.

"There's no system or organisation specifically for it. Instead, it's an area that's been relevant and that we have been aware of for several years now."

"Even if there aren't any steering documents or a systematic approach, a central focus has always been there."

"Precisely because it is difficult and elusive if you don't do it systematically, you won't get much done. Scientific craftsmanship and sustainability form well together in many ways. Together, it's like one medicine that can cure two diseases."

"Operationalise the concept of sustainability throughout education."

Organisation and participation

Taking advantage of the competency within our schools was stated as an essential part of a functioning organisation for sustainable development.

"We have the teaching group working with these questions. And sometimes it's brought up at the management level, to sum things up. We work very much from the bottom up, which is common in academia. You have to start with the research and knowledge you've got, and then you build on it. Linking it to research that's what we do, and our courses must be based on that. And it continues like that, building upon what we know and view as opportunities based on our base of knowledge and the resources we have here."

"Implement sustainable development in all steps, living as you learn with a democratic process. It's a waste of resources if we don't make sure everyone is involved and knows what we're talking about, a shared progression, where the entirety of education is seen as a whole."

"Trust the teacher's competence!"

Highlighting existing good practices

Respondents stressed the importance of recognising things already being done in sustainability work but also that it risks diluting that work.

Collegial consensus

A shared understanding among colleagues was described and is further strengthened by students' view that sustainability should be prioritised.

“There are no objections from a values perspective.”

“I think it has worked well for teachers as a whole. As a school, we understand that this is a concept we can't just skip over or handle at arm's length. There has been a collegial consensus on the importance of talking about sustainability.”

“If our ambition is to develop tomorrow's developers and leaders [...], then these dimensions must be emphasised because that's what we ourselves are claiming is needed. We must better communicate those mechanisms and convey that mindset [...]. We can do it as much as needed since there's a demand for it.”

Recently updated study programmes

Two respondents recently revised or made significant changes to their programmes, and one respondent was facing major transformation. Of the respondents who have undergone a major change, it was believed that it contributed greatly to their sustainability work and that the programmes were more in line with the times. It was pointed out that developing may be advantageous when change was already taking place. On the other hand, avoiding the risk of changed priorities was described as challenging, while other issues in transformation processes also required time.

Workshop, review and a living document

Workshops in general, but also focused on reviews of sustainable development in, for example, course syllabus, were brought up as a positive example of how the whole can be clarified and improved for the entire teaching team.

“In a workshop, perform a review of the course syllabuses from the study programme, compile the syllabus text and review it as a whole. Then mark all concepts linked to sustainable development and examine them from the three dimensions.”

“Have a workshop. And also create a written, living document that is everyone's factual starting point. That way, it'll be a shared – a living document that's always there!”

Virtual course syllabus

Several respondents expressed virtual course syllabuses as a positive step in the systematisation of sustainability and in making this work more visible, not only within issues related to sustainable development. A virtual course syllabus could also ensure that skills in sustainability are integrated throughout education. For virtual course syllabuses to function, be implemented, and maintained, respondents requested that time be allocated for it. A proposal was raised to supplement the virtual course syllabus with a clear goal matrix to

capture the systematisation as a whole.

“We’ve come to realise that we need to work with a virtual course syllabus in some way to document the paths in sustainability within education. We’re talking about typical paths that arise when you can’t pick a series of courses that build up a progression but are about something else. We need to find forms for this; perhaps virtual course syllabuses can work [...] for sustainable development and other aspects, like communication. Throwing together a series of courses that create progression within an area isn’t the solution because they must be linked to things you do, like development work.”

“There are both pros and cons. One advantage is that it meets our visions and goals for education and the concept of sustainability. But I’m still a little worried that it might be left on the side, like an appendix. And risk just being an appendix when we adjust the courses. It’s up to us.”

Student conferences

A good example brought up was the student conference for sustainable development. It was emphasised that there were challenges regarding structuring it and getting the interdisciplinary collaboration up and running, but today, it was a much-appreciated addition to student collaboration.

Collaboration between higher education institutions

There was a desire for more collaboration between similar subjects across higher education institutions. One alternative could be to join national networks for specific programmes.

“Maybe it’s more about spreading good examples, not necessarily within the university, but between higher education institutions with similar programmes.”

Interdisciplinary collaboration

Courses with mixed student groups with interdisciplinary subject-teacher teams were desired to capture the complexity of these issues and practice collaboration between professional groups in preparation for working life.

Catalyst for the work	Allocated resources and workgroups	Integration in all courses vs focus on single courses	Follow-up
Progression	ORU's goals and strategy and internal objectives	Who is responsible?	Three dimensions
The UN's 17 Sustainable Development Goals	Programme syllabuses and course syllabuses	Student influence	Sustainability conference 25–26 August

Figure 3, Table of the various subjects

Catalyst for the work

One respondent described that work with sustainability started on the initiative of the head of school, while others said it was primarily up to the programme coordinator. Several respondents spoke of how this work often grew from the bottom up. Another respondent believed that the university's goals and visions were the catalyst for the work.

Allocated resources and workgroups

Most respondents have not had any allocated time-bound resources for sustainable development integration. They also described the work as being integrated into development work. A few days of support could be sought for continuing professional development in exceptional cases. When applying for professional development support, linking one's goals to the university's overall goals and visions was considered advantageous. Within revision work, some time had been allocated to work for sustainable development via, for example, courses and seminars in sustainable development through the Centre for Academic Development. Finding time and resources for sustainability work was described as being problematic. Time promised in projects was described as challenging to put into the planned work, as there was already so much competing for their time.

“Our positions include 20% professional development time, which we can use in various ways depending on what we do, but it should go to development [...] There's nothing specifically dedicated to sustainability. It's driven from below. When teachers and those working and researching in the field say we must include it now, we find ways to include it. There's no special budget allocated for these things.”

“It's growing, but it takes time. It's not like you can centralise it and try to force it through a little faster. It's not certain that it would be better that way either [...] on the contrary. I think it'll be a stronger force if it can grow from below, along with some support. It'll draw your attention to the fact that they're good at it. Then they can 'come and give a talk about it'. Maybe a group of teachers will think it is exciting and get interested. Somehow you need to get it to grow from within. Let it get a foothold so it will last over time. And in that way, it'll also develop over time.”

“No, there are no special resources. If we need it, then we have to apply for funding. There's always a trade-off between the time it takes to write an application in relation to the money we can get out of it.”

“In concrete terms, if we were to have a sustainability group, then there must be hours for it – and I don't think there are. I don't know if there are resources for it. Otherwise, it'll be up to voluntary actions.”

“It's a question of priorities, I admit it. A workgroup would undoubtedly move the work forward if they had resources, for example, through reduced teaching time.

Integration in all courses vs focus on single courses

Three respondents mentioned that they had special courses where sustainable development had a significant role. They mentioned that the disadvantage was that it becomes an isolated component and risks not being integrated throughout the whole programme.

Two respondents pointed out that sustainable development was not currently integrated into all courses, and several respondents believed that they did not think that sustainable development necessarily had to be integrated everywhere in all courses but that it could permeate the programme anyway.

Three respondents believe sustainable development within their study programmes was integrated into all courses and permeated the whole. Both pros and cons were raised with this setup, such as challenges in ensuring it was included everywhere, including examination goals. The positive aspect of permeation was that it did not become overlooked since including everywhere in all parts emphasises its importance.

Three respondents mentioned they wanted to expand various introductory parts related to sustainable development. One respondent mentioned that they would like to bring in external support, such as lecturers from the Centre for Academic Development.

“It’s there, but perhaps not systematically. Now we have Örebro University’s vision to follow – and in that way, we can strengthen it.”

“We have chosen not to have sustainability as a separate course. Instead, we want to infuse the concept of sustainability in its various dimensions, ecological, economic, and social, into the courses where it’s relevant to do so. We’ve chosen to be slightly restrictive with the word itself [...] because I believe it’s important to avoid making it a buzzword. And even if I don’t think it’s a buzzword, it can be that you limit yourself – and then something else happens [...]. By not introducing it that way, we also hope that the paradoxical effect will be that we DO show that we care. So that it permeates the courses rather than becoming a symbol or a buzzword.”

“Sure, not having a sustainability course raised some eyebrows. But when we explained why, they understood. [...] Sustainability IS an important concept, but we don’t have a course, so what do we do instead? We developed a conference where we snap up students in the subject area we are in at the moment, and that way, it becomes more relevant within the respective dimension.”

“We’re grateful that we don’t have to apply it in a specific way or required to have a course. That we’ve been given the opportunity to relate to the concept, using it in a way that works for us, without getting into conflicts with the other things we do.”

“We’ve introduced a mini-conference for first-year students in their first course, where we present sustainability. That usually results in theoretical considerations and then permeates all courses, practical and theoretical. Our advanced courses are more about creativity, innovative thinking, and ingenuity. In those concepts, sustainability should be built in. And included later in their thesis, which dimension depends on the subject the student chooses.”

Follow-up

Three respondents stated that their programmes had no follow-up of sustainable development. In one programme, it was stipulated that it would be a part of a programme follow-up but that there was no internal tracking mechanism. Another respondent stated that follow-up was organised as part of a planned workshop and would be discussed in the programme advisory council.

One respondent was working on a more explicit follow-up, surveying sustainable development regarding knowledge and skills, and scheduled at the start and end of the student's studies and again three years after graduation. However, due to time constraints, this follow-up project had been put on hold.

Another respondent stated that accreditation had played an important role in their sustainable development work and follow-up, as their subject requires continuous monitoring. This follow-up had been carried out at the school level. Within another programme, follow-up was at the school level but not at the programme level.

It was generally considered important to capture students' views on their programme and its content and that there was room for improvement. Programmes that had gone through or were going through revisions plan to have a follow-up about a year after the programme starts.

“All reporting provides a reminder that we must continue with this. It reminds everyone and puts it on the agenda.”

“It's important that it's an ongoing process [...] Follow-up was more of a beginning in that sense. You can never know where it will lead. When you start talking about it, it always goes somewhere. If you don't talk about it, the work can come to a standstill.”

“After the revision, we conduct evaluations to get things to flow, and then get a starting point. This might be one perspective that needs to be kept in check. It should be addressed clearly.”

“Don't leave teaching teams on their own, have closer controls, follow-up by who's leading the work, schedule detailed reporting. Where everyone accounts for what they've done, like 'Have you considered this and that?' If they get keyed up, getting off track is easy.”

“There are difficulties in producing assessment materials for follow-up.”

Progression

Five respondents stated that they had progression in their programme regarding sustainable development, while two respondents pointed out that they did not. It was emphasised that progression in sustainable development could be accomplished in various ways. Some respondents mentioned one solution was broadening the aspects and perspectives addressed. Several were using case study methods to allow students to solve increasingly complex problems. Progression was described as challenging, and several respondents mentioned the

difficulties with interdisciplinary progression.

“Cases are becoming more complex, and we place greater demands on students to deal with research, integrating more and more research into the practical tasks they do – progression in generic skills instead of progression in a specific sustainability area. How we can best help and prepare students for their professional life is more about working on progression in generic skills, learning to grasp new knowledge, learning to learn, and becoming proficient at reading and taking in large amounts of material, reading, sorting, and using it in practical applications. If we practice that, students will become adept at facing a future that even we don’t know what it will entail. Being independent and willing to tackle complex tasks will equip them for an uncertain future.”

“When we think about education in a broader sense, there’s currently no clear-cut documentation. But it becomes more complex as you progress further in a programme, more complex and intertwined with other aspects. There isn’t a conventional course beyond the introductory course.”

“Progression in terms of sustainability is about broadmindedness, about gaining insights in various areas. Thinking in broader terms is more important so that you understand that wherever you are, sustainability aspects are involved.”

Örebro University’s goals and strategy – and internal objectives

Seven respondents mentioned that they were aware of the university’s goals and strategy, while some respondents expressed no familiarity with specific examples of what the organisation was doing. Several respondents stated that these goals had guided their work and were a starting point when they started their efforts. Even professionally, they applied the strategy and action plan when they chose travel methods. Most respondents responded that there were no internal objectives for their efforts on sustainable development within the programmes. Two programme coordinators said they had internal goals, at the school or programme level.

“I haven’t experienced any difficulty aligning it with Örebro University’s vision. It has been possible to interpret the overriding concepts within our activities.”

“We tend to look at the type of research we have and how we can connect it to research, not based on linear goals; that’s not how it’s done in academia.”

“In general, at Örebro University, there are many various documents that are unknown, perhaps due to the organisation’s size.”

Who is responsible?

Most respondents believed that the responsibility for sustainable development fell on the programme coordinators themselves. Still, several mentioned that it was more of a feeling than something stipulated in guidelines or steering documents.

“It feels like the responsibility lies with programme coordinators.”

“The programme coordinator has a percentage [within the scope of their job] set aside to work on progression. So it’s part of my role to work on development.”

“If you’re thinking of integrating some aspect, whether it’s sustainable development or communication skills, that permeates the programme in some way, and you want to include it in several courses, it depends on the course coordinator, their know-how, or whether they need to bring in someone to help establish that connection. It’s worth considering. Maybe it needs to be approached differently depending on the course and the individual. Some people see a natural connection [...] while others view it as something that competes for content and time within the course. Personally, I don’t see how I could contribute, especially since I don’t have higher expertise in a certain area compared to the students, so how do you go about it?”

“Some guidelines for programme coordinators regarding, for example, progression, might help. You learn as you go along.”

Three dimensions

The majority of respondents mentioned that they encountered difficulties with one or more perspectives of sustainability. Two respondents stated they had no difficulties incorporating all three sustainability perspectives because their programmes already had clear connections to them from the outset. In cases where certain perspectives were not explicitly emphasised, programme coordinators expressed a desire to do so and, to a great extent, considered doing so. One proposed solution was more interdisciplinary collaboration across programmes. Although two respondents had plans for this, practical difficulties prevented its implementation.

Difficulties in incorporating one of the perspectives were described as: “It assumes that one knows a lot of things, but I don’t. I have a lack of time and expertise.”

“We’ve tried multi-professionalism as we want different professions to be able to collaborate. We think we need to work more on that, to try and find a learning activity that bridges different programmes.”

“According to experienced colleagues, the challenge is that it’s difficult to align schedules between programmes.”

“We can introduce ecological and environmental aspects, but it’s more challenging for others. For us, all dimensions are equally relevant.”

“What do we mean by economic sustainability? Besides the fact that things should be marketable or profitable and thus continue to exist, there’s a broader discussion there, and it’s probably not entirely clear.”

The UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals

Most respondents drew on the UN’s 17 global sustainable development goals. These were described as a valuable tool, often used in cases and as a way to concretise the complex

concept of sustainable development. Many visualised the goals in both education and their own research. The goals were integrated into specific courses, and in other cases, they were integrated throughout the entire programme. One question raised was whether each programme needed to achieve all of the UN's 17 global goals or if they could select and focus on key goals.

“When doing research, I'm consciously aware of which of these goals it relates to. I think everyone does.”

“It's good to repeatedly bring up things you recognise, like ‘this course is linked to this goal’ and this goal, etc. I'm conscious about bringing them up. It's a way of connecting the dots. Sometimes we've noticed that the picture isn't as obvious, so using these goals to make it clearer can be quite useful.”

“We touch on many goals, both directly and indirectly.”

“Students work on linking relevant goals so that choosing goals becomes part of the work assignment.”

“It's a method and good to have something concrete to build on. I understand that as a student, you ask yourself, ‘How do I break this down?’ That's something we all do.”

Programme syllabuses and course syllabuses

Several respondents asked how much should be integrated into programme syllabuses and what was required.

“Something had happened in the programmes but hasn't carried over into the programme syllabuses. There's a big difference between what's stated in the programme syllabuses and what's on the programme's webpage.”

“I first looked at it that way. The question is how detailed it should be. It already exists, and maybe that should be enough. There's so much to include [...] It's enough that sustainable development is mentioned.”

“Programme syllabuses should only contain what is legally required and which courses are included. Other information can be found in other places. If you need to find certain terms, they should be in the course names. Remember, when the courses were established, a group looked at the wider picture from a programme perspective. In those discussions, I sometimes planted thoughts about including elements of sustainable development.”

“For a particular course or semester, it's first reviewed by the relevant parties, then discussed in a steering group, and then course syllabuses are rewritten. We check what has changed and why, ensuring that national goals are included. It goes through many stages [...] it may seem like there's a lot of back and forth, but there's varying viewpoints from different perspectives. So, it feels good when it's done.”

Student influence

Six respondents had identified a significant interest from students, while two said there was little to no interest.

“I’ve noticed an interest from students, indirectly in the sense that when I’ve attended courses and participated in programme advisory councils or done a strategic appraisal in advance of application periods... more and more students searched on those keywords and afterwards questioned if they’d attended a programme where sustainable development has not been addressed. So, I’d say that, in general, there’s a greater interest in it.”

“I’ve had colleagues say that their children had taught them how to sort their recyclables at home.”

“I felt motivated to do this because I noticed students are thinking about sustainability. Even though organic is popping up everywhere, it hasn’t impacted our students’ education properly, nor does it meet students’ own thoughts and ambitions regarding sustainability. And if we want a modern programme, we must get better at conveying the proper tools and that sort of thinking and philosophy. We can do as much as we want because the interest is there. It’s up to us to find the right balance.”

“Enough, really. It sparks discussions about social sustainability, giving rise to thoughts that maybe students don’t express or channel in a way that makes it productive. But then again, that’s sort of the idea. That it’ll end up kindling a pattern of actions or thoughts. That’s evidence that we’ve succeeded in creating systematic thinking. There’s enough interest and consideration for these questions that the whole group will receive them as a positive aspect.”

“Yes, absolutely... lots of interest! They think it’s important. And are passionate about it.”

“Interesting, I don’t think students bring it up themselves. There’s a significant interest in climate-related courses, but other than that, there aren’t any initiatives or inquiries into it.”

“Everyone has a lot to do, just like the teachers. And everyone’s fully focused on what needs to be done. Students, like teachers, are committed to sustainability. There’s no questioning their values.”

Student engagement

Most respondents responded that it was challenging creating engagement among students. Getting them involved in evaluations, committees, and programme advisory councils was difficult. However, one respondent felt that cooperation with students worked well. Another respondent planned to invite students to discuss sustainable development during the upcoming spring courses.

“It’s challenging to get students to want to participate. And even though we offer it, they have to want to.”

“Our students are enthusiastic. We have good cooperation with students and the student union.”

Sustainability conference 25–26 August

Most of the respondents had a positive attitude towards the conference that was held for the first time in 2022, organized by the Platform for a Sustainable Future (PSF) at Örebro University. However, many had conflicts with other conferences scheduled during the exact dates. One respondent thought it was suitable to have a date before the start of the autumn semester. A hybrid option was requested for those who could not attend in person or the entire conference. Many said they could participate digitally.

Physical conferences, in general, were seen as a good opportunity to share updates on research, share experiences, and meet colleagues, which was described as much-awaited after the pandemic.

“Hearing about others’ experiences and how they work is beneficial.”

“Over a coffee break is when you get to share ideas with each other...”

Method discussion

Looking at programme syllabuses and searching for specific words risks missing sentences that describe the same thing but using different words. There is, of course, more work on sustainable development than what appears in the programme syllabuses. However, reviewing can still be of interest because of its symbolic value, role in communication with students, and status as legally binding documents designed to capture the central elements of the programmes. It should be noted that programme syllabuses have a long updating period, so that significant changes may be underway in the form of revisions, and updated programme syllabuses are not reflected in this analysis.

Since placement was limited in time, the assignment was adapted accordingly. This led to adjustments in the number of interviews accordingly, so several areas are not addressed here. The main purpose was to contribute a basis for discussion and highlight programme coordinators' experiences working on these issues.

Reflection and a summary

There is a desire for more cooperation and collaboration in the form of interdisciplinary work teams, internal cooperation, and between schools and similar programmes. Working in groups with both students and teachers is requested. Allocated time for sustainable development work and access to the Centre for Academic Development's materials is also sought after.

Awareness of the Strategy and Action Plan could be improved. For example, most respondents are unaware of the goal of integrating sustainable development into new programme syllabuses. A challenge here is that the information is not always perceived as consolidated or coordinated and requires seeking information in many places, such as the university's guidelines for programme syllabuses, the Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development, as well as the Higher Education Ordinance.

A more systematic approach, such as follow-ups and unambiguous guidelines, is suggested to contribute to a more long-term, well-organised effort. For instance, including sustainable development as a mandatory detail in all programme advisory councils could be a way to create continuity in the work.

Regarding definitions, requirements should be better clarified. Is mentioning "sustainability" enough, or should more specific connections be provided? For example, only the engineering programmes explicitly mention the social, economic, and ecological perspectives in their programme syllabuses. This is formulated in the national goals of the Higher Education Ordinance. Unambiguous guidelines for requirements are requested. To better align with course concepts, teachers need guidelines on the requirements for an approved course syllabus or programme syllabus – clarifying what should be included in programme

syllabuses. One suggestion is to clarify in the guidelines for course and programme syllabuses whether sustainable development should be addressed and, if not, provide clear guidelines for where else it should be addressed.

Regarding progression in study programmes, a question could also be raised about whether advanced programmes can be expected to have more advanced or in-depth training on sustainable development than undergraduate programmes. A remaining question for discussion is how to ensure competence and continued professional development in sustainable development among teachers.

Many programmes have a more detailed description on their programme webpages that includes sustainable development than in the programme syllabuses. Maybe because changing programme webpages and keeping them more up to date is easier. If the Strategy and Action Plan's goal¹² is to be implemented, and all new programme syllabuses should have a systematic integration of sustainable development by 2022, then additional efforts and follow-up are needed.

Most respondents appreciated this report, especially in getting started and reviewing their own efforts. Continuous follow-ups could have the same effect.

Many respondents expressed the need for future follow-ups of the course syllabuses with more detailed descriptions and sustainability connections.

Concluding words on sustainable transformation

Within Örebro University, there is competence along with great energy and determination. By further systematising the work, one can develop and ensure that the work for sustainable development is well integrated into all programmes in the long term.

“Everyone else has ideas, too.”

Annex 2. Interview template

Programme coordinator + programme

Questions:

Systematics and Organisation

- How do you work with sustainable development in your programme?
 - Continuously and in the long term?
- How do you work with sustainable development in programme syllabuses and course syllabuses?
 - Continuously and in the long term?
- Are there allocated resources and/or working teams for this work?
- Is sustainable development integrated into all programme courses or individual courses?
- Is there progression between different aspects of sustainable development throughout the programme?
- Do you link it to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and how do you think that's working?

Follow-up

- How do you follow up on your work with sustainable development?

Knowledge and Awareness

- What do you know about the goals related to sustainable development at Örebro University? For example, regarding the Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development?
- Do you connect your internal goals to the university's overarching sustainability goals?
- How do you consider the three dimensions of sustainable development? This is because we know that for logical reasons, some programmes lean more towards a particular direction, but without a holistic perspective, they may miss important connections and synergies.
- What do you know about the resources available at the Centre for Academic Development? (Web resources, the possibility to request workshops, the course Sustainable Development in Education)

General

- Regarding implementing sustainable development in education – what are the challenges, and what works well?
- Do you have any positive experiences that can serve as good examples for others?
- Have you heard about the Sustainable Development in Education conference on 25-26 August 2022?
- What is your experience with this type of conference?
- Do you perceive an interest from students?

Endnotes

¹ **The Riksdag Administration. Higher Education Act (1992:1434) SFS 2021:1282** – April 2022
<https://www.uhr.se/en/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Swedish-Higher-Education-Act/>

² **Örebro University’s Vision and Strategy 2018–2022** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
https://www.oru.se/globalassets/inforum-sv/centrala-dokument/styrdokument/verksamhetsplanering/centrala_utgangspunkter/vision-och-strategiska-mal-for-orebro-universitet-2018-2022.pdf

³ **Örebro University, Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development at Örebro University 2019-2022** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
https://www.oru.se/globalassets/inforum-sv/centrala-dokument/styrdokument/hallbar_utveckling/strategi-och-handlingsplan-for-hallbar-utveckling-vid-orebro-universitet-2019-2022.pdf

⁴ **Örebro University, Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development at Örebro University 2023-2025**
https://www.oru.se/globalassets/inforum-en/key_documents/sustainable-development/strategy-and-action-plan-for-sustainable-development-at-orebro-university-2023-2025.pdf

⁵ **Örebro University. Environmental Assessment 2020** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
<https://www.oru.se/contentassets/97185362b2964f43b6f399f7dbf05589/miljoutredning-orebro-universitet-2020.pdf>

⁶ **Aktuell hållbarhet. Forskare: Bristfällig högskoleundervisning om hållbarhet** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
<https://www.aktuellhallbarhet.se/alla-nyheter/karriar/forskare-bristfallig-hogskoleundervisning-om-hallbarhet/>

⁷ **Örebro University. Programme Syllabuses Autumn 2019** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
<https://www.oru.se/utbildning/kurs--och-utbildningsplaner/utbildningsplaner/utbildningsplaner-fran-hosten-2019/>

⁸ **Centre for Academic Development – Örebro University. Gender and Equality in Education** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
<https://www.oru.se/om-universitetet/hogskolepedagogiskt-centrum/perspektiv/genus-och-jamstallldhet-i-utbildning>

⁹ **The Riksdag Administration. Higher Education Act (1992:1434) SFS 2021:1282** – April 2022
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¹⁰ **Örebro University’s Vision and Strategy 2018–2022** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
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¹² **Örebro University, Strategy and Action Plan for Sustainable Development at Örebro University 2019-2022** – April 2022 (in Swedish)
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