

Hans Chr. Garmann Johnsen, Stina Torjesen & Richard Ennals (eds.),
Higher Education in a Sustainable Society. A Case for Mutual
Competence Building (Dordrecht: Springer, 2015)

What is a sustainable society, and how can higher education help us to develop toward it? This is the question guiding the authors in this book the underlying aim of which is to explore the concept of sustainability as a much wider concept than usually referred to in terms of environmental threats. The focus is on various disciplines in higher education, and more precisely on studies pursued within the University of Agder in Norway. The approach of the book reaches though far beyond the Norwegian context and makes it relevant to every higher education institution.

The book is divided into six parts. Part I has three chapters on sustainability in “Humanistic and Cultural Perspectives”; Part II has two chapters on “Sustainability in Life Science”; Part III contains three chapters on “Sustainability in Technology and Planning Studies”; Part IV includes three chapters on “Sustainability and the Teaching of Management and Business Development”; Part V discusses in three chapters on “The Sustainable University”; and Part VI concludes with one chapter on “The Challenge of Mutual Competence Building”. I will not go into each chapter, rather I try to summarise here my learnings from the book and identify its relevance to the readers.

The content - the disciplines - is clearly not what one would relate at first instance to sustainability but Chapter 1, which is written by the editors, is very helpful to understand how the authors and the editors approach the theme of the book. This chapter provoked my interest for the whole book (and especially for my field, educational studies and teacher education) and for those who are new to this topic this chapter is vital and should not be skipped. In this chapter, the editors make it clear that they do not see sustainability as a fixed position or a well-defined concept, but rather as a framework for discussion and an opportunity to rethink our ideas about the role of universities, our disciplines and the world we live in.

A common discussion in all chapters is the issue of responsibility across disciplines, both towards particular professions but also to the wider society. In Part II, in a discussion on nursing, it is pointed out, for example, that the *International Code of Ethics for Nurses* states: “The nurse also shares responsibility to sustain and protect the natural environment from depletion, pollution, degradation and destruction” (p.69, cited from the *International Council of Nurses*). Sustainability according to environmental issues is thus seen to be an important part of the nursing profession. Should it be similar in other professions? In this chapter, it is also discussed how sustainability is a matter regarding enough or a shortage of health care workers in each country or area and the same discussion is on teacher education in Part I. Here the focus is related to sustainability and globalization and is a highly relevant discussion in rural and remote areas. In the chapter 6, on “Sustainable Diets”, the reader is confronted with the hard fact that our diets are no longer sustainable.

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Everything about our diets seems to have gone out of control: the usage of fossil energy for the production, of energy to produce artificial fertilisers, the transport of food, not to mention the pollution of soil, air and water. The chapter also draws our attention not only to the healthiness of our food, that has so far been the emphasis in the official guidelines to people, but also how sustainable our food is, e.g. in terms of location, transport and food categories. New generations are forced to find solutions to this problem caused by earlier generations. To me, this is one of the main contributions of this book. Universities, with their broad and diverse fields of knowledge and societal impacts, are in an ideal position to lead necessary action and changes in the world as regards moving toward a more sustainable world. It can be hard for some disciplines and professions to involve sustainability into their activity and professional cultures, if it has not been there before. This could be the case for technology and engineering, as discussed in Part III (chapter 7). The authors point out that this should not be the case, as technology and society are fundamentally interdependent and the planet really needs a change. Instead of focusing on one right answer as is normally the case in engineering, students should be taught how to be active and reflective in their learning, and learn to include several perspectives in their search for answers. This could mean that one right answer is perhaps and very likely not the point. Actually, this is more than less the conclusion in most of the chapters, i.e. that students need to be introduced and challenged to finding a good balance between different theoretical concepts, and knowledge about how to apply them in practice (chapter 8).

I do not have actual negative comments on this book, perhaps because I found it very intriguing in many ways, both as an academic and personally. The only thing that I would like to mention is that it would have been useful to have a short summary at the end of each Part, similar to the prologue before each Part. I liked nonetheless the final section in chapter 9 (9.4.2, "The Educational Role of the University for Sustainable Planning"). There are some chapters that include too much literature on background information, which is of course important to relate the discipline to the core issue of sustainability, but they could easily have been shortened without undermining the content. If people do not want to read the whole book, but only look at certain disciplines, it is useful to read chapter 16.1.1 in any case. Entitled "Short Review of the Book", each Part is summarised therein. Also, I would recommend to read chapter 16.3, "What is Mutual Competence Building?". In that chapter, the editors draw together the recurring themes across the five Parts.

The prerequisite for a society to become sustainable depends on our attitudes toward the changes that need to become real and the willingness to react to a challenging situation. Here, Universities and other educational institutions have a role in educating critical individuals that can lead and influence future citizens, their actions and work. This book is a

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useful tool for all disciplines, academic departments and Universities to take action and communicate with individuals and the society on how to build our mutual future in a sustainable way. I encourage my workplace - the University of Akureyri - to do so.

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