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# Why and how do universities work for sustainability in higher education (HE)?

Sustainability in  
higher education

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to open up a discussion about the roles and responsibilities of universities in society.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The vision of the Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) Skåne a leading example on how to develop new knowledge about education for sustainable development (ESD) at all levels. The paper poses the question “Why do universities involve in this process?”. Lund University as the old, traditional university and the ten-year old university of Malmö on the other hand was formed on the bases of a vision about a university for all people.

**Findings** – The paper finds that two universities have been active in creating RCE Skåne, together with three political organizations. The vision has developed to include issues like capacity for cross-boundary action, knowledge-sharing and civic education, all important parts in learning for a sustainable future.

**Practical implications** – The paper discusses the processes at these universities that led up to working together in RCE Skåne and the importance of having the Act on Higher Education in 2006 about responsibility for education for sustainability at all universities.

**Originality/value** – In forming RCEs all over the world it is important to learn from each other and universities play an important role in these actions.

**Keywords** Higher education, Universities, Legislation, Empowerment, Students, Sweden

**Paper type** Case study

## Introduction: Why and how do universities work for sustainability in RCE Skåne?

The Regional Centre of Expertise (RCE) Skåne is organized primarily as a regional partnership led by Malmö University, the City of Malmö, Lund University, the City of Lund and Region Skåne. In this paper, we will discuss the difficulties and possibilities we have encountered when trying to have five different cultures focusing on a common goal: education and learning for sustainability. We will in more depth discuss how the universities have undertaken the task of sustainable development. In the end we will reflect on different pathways to reach this goal in common.



## The process towards RCE Skåne

Skåne is a region with many great opportunities but it also has its share of challenges that must be resolved in order to reach sustainable development (RCE Skåne candidate, Baseline Study). The vision in common is to make Skåne a leading example on how to

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develop education for sustainable development (ESD) and in accordance with the ambitions of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The aim is thereby to contribute to the empowerment of people of all ages to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future. Our intention is to assist in the exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences and research on ESD.

Initially, the efforts to establish an RCE in Skåne began in the autumn of 2005 following a meeting between Mr Carl Lindberg, Swedish UNESCO Counsellor, and representatives from Malmö University, the City of Malmö, Lund University, the City of Lund and Region Skåne. Members from these organizations started a working group to initiate and establish cooperation on ESD in Skåne and furthermore, to write an application to United Nations University, Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) on becoming an RCE. Since February 2006, this working group has had regular meetings, organized two conferences and has made two study visits to RCE Rhine-Meuse to discuss, observe and study their RCE and to receive support and supervision in our process.

According to the UNU and RCE partnership should include universities and other partners in the surrounding region. In our case all five partners work systematically, having sustainable development within their respective organisations and all agreed on increasing and developing the common work on different perspectives of ESD.

In April 2006, two representatives from RCE Candidate Skåne participated in the International Conference on RCE:s, in Yokohama, Japan. Following this, a Baseline Study, was submitted to the Ubuntu Committee of Peers Meeting in December 2006 and in June 2007 Skåne was launched as a RCE.

The RCE will initially focus on ESD in the Lund-Malmö region but the aim is to extend the partnership to cover the whole region and involve all players who can and want to contribute to ESD, locally, regionally and globally. Although not connected to RCE Skåne, there are a great number of actors contributing to ESD all over the Region of Skåne.

Today, RCE Skåne is run by a steering committee that has a shared responsibility for different tasks within the RCE, but there is no coordinator and no funding for work in common. So far we have a list of criteria and projects who want to be part of our RCE can apply to use the logo of RCE. So far two projects have been accepted and there are more to be scrutinized.

The criteria are that a project connected to RCE Skåne undertakes the following tasks:

- involve at least two different organisations;
- focuses on learning and ESD; and
- include all dimensions of sustainable development, e.g. Economical, Social and Ecological.

We apply on a wide interpretation of learning, individual as well as cooperative, and formal as well as informal or non-formal education.

### **Two universities in RCE Skåne**

Two universities have been active in creating RCE Skåne together with three political organizations. Our main question in this paper is “Why and how do universities involve in this process?” Below we will describe the different pathways that have been

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taken before being involved in creating RCE Skåne. Lund University as the old, traditional university, has a long history of involvement in issues concerning, among other things, environment and energy, human and child rights, medicine and health, design, technology and innovations both when education and research is concerned. The 10-year-old university of Malmö, on the other hand, was formed on the bases of a vision about a university for all people. This vision has developed to include issues like capacity for cross-boundary action, knowledge-sharing, internationalisation and civic education, all important parts in learning for a sustainable future.

In Sweden, all universities have (1 February 2006) been assigned an additional task by a new amendment to the Act on Higher Education in the opening paragraph (Act on Higher Education (1992:1434-1 Chapter 5 §):

Institutions of higher education shall promote sustainable development in their activities meaning that present and future generations will be assured a healthy and good environment, economic and social welfare and justice.

This means that research and education at universities directed towards ESD is one of Swedish society's prioritised fields of education and research.

### **Lund university towards education for sustainability**

Sweden has had, in the past, a turbulent history with Denmark and when the Danish withdrew from Southern Sweden in 1658, Lund University was formed 1666, in part to demonstrate the re-establishment of Swedish control. It was in the eighteenth century that the university began to flourish, largely due to the Swedish state assuming full financial responsibility of the university. At the end of the twentieth century the university had developed into its current structure, with eight core faculties and a range of surrounding institutes. It is one of the largest universities in the Nordic countries with some 40,000 students and about 5,500 staff. It is thus an old as well as a large organisation for research and education. That is, of course, a great challenge to implementing the new Amendment to the Act on Higher Education regarding Education for Sustainability (Wickenberg, 2007, p. 67; 2008, p.166).

Sustainable (global) development was merely mentioned in the Vision part of the University's Strategic plan, 2002-2006. Although the University had quite many research projects and publications addressing sustainable development, but this had not so far given any strong traces in policy documents at the University.[1] One example is LUCSUS (Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies), previously known as Centre for Environmental Studies–MICLU. MICLU started in 2000 within the Faculty of Science. During the first three years MICLU arranged courses, seminars and debates and worked on creating networks both inside and outside the university. MICLU played a very active part in creating the Danish-Swedish platform Øresund Environment Academy. In 1 January 2005, MICLU changed its name to LUCSUS and left the Faculty and is now placed at the area of Special Activity within the University (10th Area). In 2004, the Vice-chancellor commissioned LUCSUS to initiate and promote this research area. An important task within this research profile area is to support research ideas by facilitating networking and distributing of planning grants, which aim to assist in the development of concrete research proposals for external funding.

Among other organisations in this knowledge area at Lund University is the International Industrial Environmental Economics, IIIEE. This Institute, founded in 1994, is a unique and creative response to the global challenge of sustainable development. It grew out of concern that within industry and government, where the power to affect environment conditions—negatively or positively—is greatest, decisions affecting the environment were still being made as a response to problems after they had arisen. The urgent task for the IIIEE was to demonstrate the potential and value of preventative approaches—of pollution prevention, waste minimisation, eco-design—working closely with Swedish and European industries and governments.

The next Strategic plan, 2007–2011, was quite different in this respect. Sustainable development was clearly and in many contexts written into the Strategic Plan after some years of discussion within different parts of the University (above). Under the heading of Mission sustainable development is formulated in this way:

Through research, HE and artistic development work, Lund University shall contribute to the development and utilisation of knowledge, both nationally and internationally. Through research-based education, we shall train students who are able to contribute to the development of tomorrow's global knowledge society [...] Through innovations, we shall develop the commercial and public sectors, and contribute to a global, sustainable development of society.

The University has obviously learned from dialogues and debates in society—nationally and internationally—and within the University and thus evidently deepened the understanding of the notion “sustainable development”. Special efforts regarding research are being made in the university's three high profile areas: Medicine, Sustainable Development and Life Sciences. We can also clearly notice this in the section in the Strategic plan titled Basic Values:

The university shall be a driving force in society, cooperating with the international university community, as well as participating in research and education in global questions of decisive import to the future of mankind. HE and research contribute to democracy, a sustainable development and liberation from oppression. Our University shall stand for goals and visions that inspire hope!

Cross-disciplinary collaboration within the University is now highlighted. The University management, employees and students shall strive “to become known for taking responsibility in social debate and public issues”. The University shall widen the understanding outside its walls for the importance of HE and research. The University wants to “become a dynamic driving force within national and international society and culture, working to improve international relations and achieve sustainable development”.

So for the policy formulating arena—now for the realisation arena or the implementation level at the University. The implementation processes started in the autumn 2006 after a separate Policy document on environment and sustainable development was decided by Board of the University. That was in many ways a result of the new Amendment in the Act on Higher Education—taken into force in 1 February 2006. The Vice Chancellor commissioned an Inspiration Group with dedicated and experienced persons in this field of sustainable development and education/learning: researchers, teachers and students from all faculties to initiate and promote this work at the University coordinated by the University's Environment Director.

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The Vice Chancellor also, during this year, commissioned some representatives to participate in the creation of RCE Skåne.

During 2006 and 2007 the Inspiration group has been working in many ways in different groups and in many University arenas in what is called Dialogue Processes at the University. The mission for the Inspiration Group is to enforce the Dialog Processes (many to be seen as part of our RCE) in:

- supporting the work done in/at the faculties;
- creating meeting arenas and dialogue;
- collecting and spreading the good examples and tools;
- supporting the integration of sustainable development in a University common development of education/learning; and
- identifying and passing on suggestions for University common structures for supporting integration of sustainable development in research and education.

### **Malmö university – where diversity makes a difference**

When Malmö University was created in 1998 it had a special mission of civic education like the universities that started in the nineteenth century in England in the industrial areas and as a difference to Oxford and Cambridge. This mission is also related to liberal education as was the idea in the United States. Liberal education is described by Nussbaum (1997) as aiming at students being able to participate in discussions in an intelligent way and contribute to a better world. Even if we do not know what a better world is, we have to critically discuss both our own contemporary time and discuss in what direction we want to go. At Malmö University we talk about this in the Swedish term of “medborgerlig bildning” and civic and liberal education are the translations I have found in different publications (Stoltz and Olausson, 2004. Malmö University Vision, 2006). Sustainable development is another way of discussing in what direction we want the world to develop and is thus another way of expressing liberal education. It is also more elaborated as it includes the natural world where liberal education only looks at the human world.

Nussbaum (1997) writes about liberal education as a way to learn to respect what human is, to learn about and of each other, understand the history of different people and learn to appreciate differences between others and myself. In other words, to see how diversity is contributing to a better world. Stoltz and Olausson, 2004 write that power and democracy constitutes a central part of liberal education. Power is part of society and will be used in different ways weather you train at Malmö university to become a nurse or an engineer. This has to be discussed in our research and programs to be part of our visionary work of developing and maintaining democracy.

At Malmö University we try to keep a balance between the traditional expectations of what constitutes knowledge at a university and what is expected from employers. Liberal education is considered to connect these expectations and educating students to become not only knowledgeable in their future professions but also critical citizens. The same idea relates to research done at the university-researchers are expected to be critical citizens in their research fields.

Stoltz and Olausson conclude by saying that fairness, equality and diversity are important issues for liberal education as is sustainable development. Malmö University should be accessible for everyone irrespective of gender, ethnicity, class and handicap.

This means that processes for knowledge, learning and research taking place here should consider that people are similar and different. Liberal education is a way for Malmö University to relate to our surrounding world.

In 1998 when Malmö University started with the mission of liberal education, the work concentrated on three perspectives that should penetrate the content: environment, gender and ethnicity/migration. This was seen as new in those days and by many not considered as part of the task of a university. But slowly these ideas have diffused through the departments and programs. Some ideas have been more accepted in one program than the other like gender in cultural programs and environment in natural science programs. Altogether the student says in a questionnaire from 2003 (Serder, 2006) that environment has not been emphasized as efficiently as the other perspectives. For staff there has also been a two-week course about the three perspectives. The work still goes on both with courses for staff and a “Week about the Perspectives” in October every year since 2002.

What has happened since 1998 is that gender is now part of the task of all universities from the Agency of Higher Education in Sweden. All universities are to include gender as part of the work done at universities both in education as well as in the internal work with recruiting staff, leaders, etc.

Broader recruitment of students from minority groups has also become part of the task for all Swedish universities. At Malmö University we now discuss this as a way to work with inclusive awareness taking to an advantage that students bring different experiences to studies.

Environmental issues are a vital part of sustainability. Education for sustainability was included in the Act on Higher Education in 2006 that has also become part of university work all over Sweden.

The next step for Malmö University has been to launch the vision towards 2015 and the Strategy for Education and Research, 2009–2012. Both give the same description of the university working towards sustainability (Vision of Malmö University, 2006; Strategy for Education and Research 2009–2012):

Malmö University has established itself as Europe’s leading vocational university—representing what is known as the Malmö model—where capacity for cross-boundary action (across research, teaching and vocational boundaries) has been developed symbiotically with an activity-based teaching method. We have developed an organization for multidisciplinary research and education in accordance with the Bologna model and strengthened the links between teaching and research. . . /Malmö University occupies a prominent role with regard to knowledge-sharing in Malmö, in the region and abroad (Vision of Malmö University, 2006).

In our efforts to achieve this we assume the following basic concepts: Capacity for cross-boundary action; Partnership and Knowledge-sharing; Internationalisation; and Civic Education. These concepts are described in the Vision and in the following way.

The first one, cross-boundary action, implies that staff and students at Malmö University should develop their capacity for action. This means that in their future activities they transform knowledge into action and action into knowledge. A fundamental aspect of knowledge formation lies in forming a capacity for cross-boundary action, which makes use of the varied backgrounds and experiences of students and staff. Instruction and research are to assume this diversity and utilise the variation in life experience and in cultural and social experience. Our work must be

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based on the unique potential of each one of our students and staff for contributing to the development of a capacity for action based on experience, scientific knowledge and vocational relevance.

This capacity for cross-boundary action can only be developed in close collaboration and in partnership with society as a whole. Partnership implies a reciprocal undertaking to cooperate and collaborate on questions that are of real significance to both parties. One essential of the partnership has to be intellectual freedom and critical thinking. The partnership is based on a constant questioning of ourselves and each other, a questioning based on mutual trust.

Malmö University has a research and teaching culture that values knowledge for its contribution to human welfare and that takes account of the global dimensions of every question. The aim is for all concerned to have a multi-cultural capacity and be global citizens and for all our programs to be internationally marketable.

Finally, in civic education we work to give all students and staff a greater and more detailed knowledge of a number of basic questions concerning power and democracy. We call these questions perspectives and these change with the changes in society itself. Such perspectives are gender, environment and also migration and ethnicity. We meet in our daily activities and discuss urgent and fundamental questions concerning our own future. In this way civic education contributes to the capacity for cross-boundary action in our activities as professionals and citizens.

There has been some confusion though when the concept of Civic or Liberal Education was introduced. And there is great need for further discussion among the staff at the university about the vision and these basic concepts and how they relate to the earlier perspectives. But altogether Malmö University is certainly working hard to be a socially responsible university for all, critically looking at the development in our society of knowledge and at the consequences of globalisation.

### **Joint projects**

One of the intentions in RCE Skåne is to assist in the exchange of knowledge, ideas, experiences and research on ESD. One example of this cooperation is an EU-research application RCE Öresund prepared mainly during 2007: Young Persons' Participation in the Future's Society. In this joint application three universities (Danish University on Education, DPU; Lund University and Malmö University) are working closely with three municipalities (Copenhagen, Lund and Malmö) around the straight of Öresund between Denmark and Sweden. The application is to be decided upon in April 2008. This concrete and collective case we can see as an evident result of the cooperation within RCE Skåne but also stretching towards creating a new RCE in Denmark.

Another project is on Food as a means for learning for sustainable development. The aim of the project is to evaluate and develop educational materials and tools on food and ESD and to evaluate the results of the education. It is a concrete, practise related, research and development project in order to transform and improve ESD. Organisations involved in the process are Malmö University, City of Malmö, City of Lund and other municipalities in Skåne, WWF Sweden and Ecological Market Centre (EMC and WWF are NGOs).

There are several other projects aiming at developing learning for sustainable development:

- The collaboration project between IIIEE, Lund University, and all the Upper Secondary Schools in the Lund municipality on ESD using Internet platforms.
- In-service training for teachers in Malmö and Lund, respectively, on ESD, forthcoming in summer, 2008.
- Good examples of ESD in Malmö are reported in a book published in April 2008.

Collaboration is taking place between Region Skåne and Malmö University in a project about Clean Technology; between the City of Malmö and Malmö University concerning Sustainable City Development and there are several others. Please visit our homepage [www.rceskane.se/](http://www.rceskane.se/)

### **Discussion**

We can today notice and reflect on the importance of the presence of and contribution by a university's management in the very start of the implementation process of new norms. We know that this is of vital importance to the organisation. An important result from this perspective is the understanding that it is knowledge, commitment, and inspiration from the actor's lifeworld that has been allowed—contrary to earlier ideals—to influence the professional role (in the system) of the university's actors. This mode of professional practice has been introduced by exceptionally dedicated individuals or key actors that have acted as forerunners and norm setters. This development would not have been possible if the professional and bureaucratic-administrative actors had not adapted to this development by creating norm-supporting structures in the local environment of the universities. The norm support given by the leaders of the universities is necessary and crucial to success in this respect of local implementation (Wickenberg, 1999, 2006).

We are in the beginning of an interesting process of collaboration about learning for sustainable development. It will take time before any results can be distinguished but already there are some tendencies to reflect on.

### **Difficulties and challenges**

We have been meeting in a steering committee during two years. There is no extra funding and the project has so far not been able to penetrate the processes of budgeting at the five organizations. There are also difficulties to find spare time for these active committee people to meet regularly. For the collaboration to be a success the administrations have to be involved to a greater degree.

#### *Successes so far and some reflections for the future*

Norm Supporting Structures are essential to identify, create and make use of in the very local level of implementation of new education policy in universities to support the local key actors like the "souls of fire", the very dedicated persons from the groundswell. This in turn has collected its nourishment and driving force from the distant management and action impulses connected to the policy development that has taken place at the national and international levels. Through collaboration many projects have had an easier start than would have otherwise been the case like the book of good examples. Other projects have exposed new solutions and ideas as is the case with the EU application where participants from the six stakeholders have contributed with completely new aspects all along the process.

The five organisations all have to find “what’s in it for me?” and see how joint projects can multiply what is done by one stake-holder.

Whether or not the initiation of the idea of sustainable development as a cognitive, competence or experiential learning field in universities will last, still remains to be seen. It will require a development and restructuring of sustainable development knowledge itself as well as in concrete applications. ESD in HE are vital in those learning and clarifying processes for future actions, learning and empowerment in society.

The importance of having the Act on Higher Education in 2006 about responsibility for education for sustainability at all universities is an important part in developing our universities. On the other hand the support from UNU is equally important. And we, as key persons, will keep on working.

### Note

1. Miljö och hållbar utveckling– samhällsvetenskapliga perspektiv från en lundahorisont (Environment and Sustainable development – Social Science Perspectives from a Lund horizon), 2004, Studentlitteratur. Researchers from seven different faculties participated in this anthology.

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