(Inconvenient) Truth or Fairy-tale: Sustainability At Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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ABSTRACT

This mixed methods research aims to understand how staff and students of the Faculty of Social Sciences (FSS) of the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VUA) experience the sustainability initiatives of the university. Sustainability in organizations is gaining importance now that organizations feel socially responsible for their ecological impact and are held accountable for this impact. VUA claims to have developed policies and practices in order to try to become a more sustainable organization. This research aims to find out what the frontstage of these initiatives entails and how they are experienced in the backstage by staff and students. This led to the research question: How can the frontstage and the backstage of sustainability initiatives of the VUA be aligned?. Methods that have been used to gain an understanding of the frontstage and backstage of the sustainability initiatives of VUA are qualitative ethnographic methods (fieldwork, interviewing, participant observation, observation and document analysis) and a quantitative survey. The data gathered offers insight into the sustainability initiatives of VUA as they are presented to the outside world and experienced in practice, concluding that the staff and students of the Faculty of Social Science experience a discrepancy between the frontstage and the backstage of the sustainability accounting efforts of VUA.

KEYWORDS

Ethnograpy, sustainability, VU Amsterdam, Mixed-Methods, Faculty of Social Sciences, organizational sciences

Introduction

When this research started in March 2020, VUA had just been awarded a second place in the Times Higher Education (THE) Impact Ranking for its impact on the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 'Climate Action'. This makes VUA the second-best university worldwide to combat climate change through research, education, and its organizational policies and practices. This seems to be an impressive accomplishment. Combatting climate change is becoming more important for organisations, while they struggle to understand the complex problems surrounding sustainability. And together with this complexity, the organisations have to manage their image to the outside world while trying to keep this in line with the experiences with the organisation's day to day practices of insiders. This research dives into the awarded sustainability initiatives at VU and compares them to their practices and performances as experienced by staff and students of the Faculty of Social Science (FSS). By researching sustainability initiatives as they are stated in documents

of VUA and on its websites, the frontstage of the organization can be visualized. The frontstage of an organisation is how the organisation presents itself to the outside world. The experiences with the awarded initiatives of staff and students of the FSS paint an image of VUA's backstage. The backstage of an organization can been seen as the day-to-day life within that organisation, the actual way of doing things that is not used to impress the outside world. Therefore, the research question is: *How can the frontstage and the backstage of sustainability initiatives of the VUA be aligned?*

Methods used to answer the research question include semi-structured interviews, (participant) observation, document analysis, surveys and fieldwork. The use of qualitative as well as quantitative methods allows for triangulation and brings a deeper understanding of the problematics surrounding sustainability in public service organisations.

Academic and Societal Relevance

Although there have been many studies regarding the environmental impacts and sustainable development of private companies, public-sector organizations (PSOs) and their agendas for sustainability accounting and accountability are often overlooked. Ball and Grubnick (2007) argue for more awareness of the leading position of PSOs in the process of creating a more sustainable future. PSO's have a central role in the lives of many people, especially educational institutions. The main objective of these organizations is to provide educational services and improve knowledge and understanding. This makes their role in solving social problems central. In addition, Ball and Grubnick (2007) contend that the differences between the private and public sector justify the need for a distinctive analysis of their sustainable development. They call for qualitative research of PSOs to understand sustainability accounting and accountability in such organizations. By conducting research at VUA, the call for research into the sustainability accounting of PSO's is answered.

Secondly, this research helps in finding more clarity around the 'wicked problems' of sustainability in organizations. A wicked problem is a problem that is constantly changing and very difficult to solve because of its social complexities (Kolk, 2011). This research helps to shine a light on how VUA is dealing with the wicked problem of sustainability and how their ways of dealing with the problem are experienced by staff and students of the FSS. This helps in creating a bigger understanding of how VUA and other universities can effectively contribute to solving wicked problems.

Thirdly, this research is a counterpart of organizational studies with a strong corporate or organizational bias that take the frontstage of organizations for granted. In contrast, the current research is critically analysing the relationship between VUA's frontstage and backstage in the area of sustainability accounting (Bondy et al., 2012). This contributes to the understanding of organization's sustainability accountability while stressing the importance of a critical point of view towards the matter.

Lastly, the present research can help to improve the sustainability initiatives and their performance. The research contributes to further developing VUA's sustainability efforts and will lead to a proposition of future steps for policy development to help VUA become more sustainable. Not only will VUA profit from this research, but also its employees, students, and the environment around the organization.

Literature review

This section provides a literature review of the key concepts of this research aiming to create of deeper understanding of the concepts relevant to answer the research question: *How can the frontstage and the backstage of sustainability initiatives of the VUA be aligned?*

First it will be defined what sustainability entails and how its importance increased over the years. This will also make clear that sustainability is a wicked problem. It will then be illustrated why the growing importance of

solving this wicked problem led to the rise of the implementation of sustainability initiatives in PSO's. After that it will be theorized how this leads to organizations putting up an organizational façade, hiding discrepancies between the organizations frontstage and backstage. Once this is made clear, it will be explained how collective action can address wicked problems. Lastly, it will be explained why a narrative approach with the use of metaphors can be valuable for organization scientists while presenting their research findings.

Sustainability: A Wicked Problem

For large established organizations like VUA, striving towards sustainability is a wicked problem. The challenge already starts with deciding what sustainability actually is. In the last few years, it has become quite clear that working on sustainability is in the best interest of ourselves and our planet, but what sustainability exactly entails and views on how to solve the problems that come with this vary hugely (Linnenluecke & Griffiths, 2010).

The problematics around sustainability became widely known after the publication of the *Common Future* report by the World Commission on Environment and Development. (WCED) in 1987. In this report, the WCED linked sustainability to prosperity, social equity and environmental integrity. They also coined the term *sustainable development*: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p.43).

The increasing attention for sustainable development provides a framework for discussion, thinking and innovating. However, implementation of sustainable development by countries, NGOs and other organizations has proven to be difficult, it forms a 'wicked problem'. A wicked problem includes multi-casualties, interdependencies, divergent perceptions, unintended outcomes of possible solutions and the involvement of a multitude of stakeholders with conflicting interests. In addition, a wicked problem is

characterized by uncertainty, high risk, ambiguity, limited understanding and a lack of clarity (Kolk, 2011). This makes analysing and solving the problem highly difficult. The fact that sustainable development addresses social, environmental and economic problems add to the complexity (Pryshlakivsky & Searcy, 2013).

A Façade: Frontstage vs. Backstage

The bottleneck for the actual implementation of sustainability initiatives can be explained by the 'organizational façade'. Organizational façades are "a symbolic front erected by organizational participants designed to reassure stakeholders of the legitimacy of the organization and its management" (Abrahamson & Baumard, 2008; p.438). Cho et al (2015) argue that organizations are forced to develop façades due to contradictory institutional and societal pressures while dealing with wicked problems.

The implementation of sustainability initiatives can be visualized as the façade that Goffman (1959) saw between the frontstage and backstage of an organization. Goffman (1959) claims that people change their activities in the presence of other persons. In the frontstage, important aspects of the activity are accentuated and the aspects that might discredit the fostered impression are suppressed. A person's backstage is the place where he or she believes nobody will intrude, it is a place of brief relaxation. Vital secrets are visible backstage and are hidden from the public that watches the frontstage.

In the case of sustainability in PSO's, the organizations are hiding their less sustainable backstage behind the ideal frontstage image of a sustainable organization that is presented to the public. The organization can thus make itself seem more sustainable to the public to stay interesting or valuable. Often, impression management is used for this, which has been defined as 'the process through which organizational members create and maintain desired impressions' (Gardner & Martinko, 1988; pp. 321). With regard to sustainability, the organization uses impression management to put up a

'Green Wall'. This is making their organization look greener from the outside than it actually is (Tata & Prasad, 2014) by using sustainability initiatives as a token rather than actually changing practices and policies to become a more sustainable organization.

Collective Action in Organizations

Collective action can be more impactful than individual action when solving wicked problems. Organizations have the ability to stimulate collective action, they are often portrayed as big entities where individuals can pool their efforts to achieve objectives that they would be unable to achieve alone (Knoke, 1988).

Critical mass theory is often used to illustrate the workings of collective action (Olsen, 1965). 'Critical mass' is a concept used in physics, it refers to the number of radioactive materials that is needed to start a nuclear fission. In social science, a critical mass is a small group of individuals that makes big contributions to the public good while the majority of the population waits with contributing until it is clear that a certain goal can be achieved. A critical mass of individuals taking action is necessary to bring about change in society (Marwell & Oliver, 1993).

In addition to this, Simpson and Macy (2001) found that power positions play an important role in collective action. Low-power actors' participation outcomes are higher when coalitions are formed and if a critical mass is realized. They too argue that an actors' structural or relational power position affects the bargaining power of low-power actors and their ability to form a coalition to overcome their powerless position and gain benefit from their participation in collective action (Simpson and Macy, 2004). An actor's power position is determinant for the gains of their participation, which means that low-power actors on their own cannot get as much benefit from participating in collective action as more powerful actors could. For low-power actors to participate, a critical mass should be created by forming coalitions of multiple low-power actors striving towards the same public good.

Narrative Approach: The Use of Metaphors

To make sense of this research into the wicked problem of sustainability, metaphors will be used in the empirical chapter to make the findings understandable and link them to the literature. Organizational studies show different ways of incorporating narrative in their presentation (Czarniawska, 2014). Metaphors can be seen as a representation of organizational life (Morgan, 1980), they are useful for the visualization of organizational reality and lay out the lines for theorizing this reality (Cornelissen, 2005).

Metaphors have three particular qualities that give them the capacity to give insight into new ways of understanding (Cornelissen, 2005). Firstly, researchers can use metaphors to express and map abstract or complex organizational phenomena. This is useful when creating understanding or trying to relate to theorethical ideas or research findings (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Secondly, metaphors possess a plurality and openness of meaning. They have a heuristic quality for showing multiple ways of conceptualizing and seeing organizational phenomena (Cornelissen, 2005). Thirdly, metaphors have characteristics that give them sensory and imaginative qualities. This gives the text a fresh, immediate and raw form, making it inviting to view organizational phenomena from a new perspective and create new understanding (Morgan, 1980).

Research Design

This research is a mixed-methods research. In order to collect all the data for answering the research question I have conducted qualitative ethnographic research using interviewing, document analysis and (participant) observation. The quantitative method used was a survey in collaboration with the Green Office. Using mixed methods created the opportunity to triangulate the data. Triangulation is helpful to find meaningful similarities and differences between qualitative and quantitative data. This way of combining data from several different research methods helps the researcher to overcome intrinsic biases (Terrel, 2011).

The design of the research was left quite open at the start, which gave me the freedom to find a place where I could find the most relevant data. The field of data collection was VUA as a whole, a very broad field. With time, I decided to focus on the areas to which I had gained access and in which I saw an opportunity to find relevant information with which I could answer my research question. This eventually led to a focus on the FSS caused by the fact that the survey of the Green office was conducted at the FSS. And secondly, by the closing of the campus due to COVID-19 which limited my access to faculties with which I was less in contact myself. My approach in the field has thus been iterative, this allowed me to keep my focus on what was important. I kept my focus clear by revisiting my data regularly to see what stood out and deserved more of my attention.

Methods & Methodology

Because VUA as an organization was the key feature, I chose to conduct organizational ethnography at VUA. Organizational ethnography tries to grasp the intricacies of everyday organizational life by closely monitoring this life. This way of discovering is often described as 'making the strange familiar and the familiar strange' (Ybema et al., 2009). Bate (1997) characterizes ethnography as a way of observing a field, being present in this field, and trying to understand the happenings in the field form the perspective of the ones involved. My immersion in the field provided me with extensive information about this field. Interviewing, observing and document analysis enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the sustainability initiatives present at VUA and how these are experienced by students and employees of the FSS.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Conversations: When conducting a semi-structured interview, the interviewer does not strictly follow a formal list with set questions. More open-ended questions are asked to allow discussion, a list of these questions is enclosed in Appendix A (Bryman, 2012). By conducting interviews, I was able to dive into the deeper layers of experiences with sustainability initiatives at VUA. Interviewing and conversations have allowed me to engage more with the respondents and the field, leading to an understanding of the field from their perspectives. I have conducted 21 semi-structured interviews with students form the FSS in the period of May 2020 – April 2020, the interviews took 30 – 45 minutes. The data gathered during the interviews was analysed by transcription and coding, using the software programme ATLAS ti. For the coding process I started with open coding, which is done by breaking the textual data up in discrete parts. This was followed by axial coding, drawing connections between codes, and selective coding by selecting core categories that capture the essence of the research. For this research the core codes were: 'individual effort/interest', 'experience at VUA', 'role of VUA as a PSO' and 'suggestions for improvement at VUA'.

(Participant) Observation: I have carried out overt (participant) observation in closed as well as open settings. (Bryman, 2012). I gained access to closed settings by accepting a volunteering function at the Green Office for their FSS-GO project and by enrolling for the Interdisciplinary Community Service Learning (ICSL) course, one of the courses of the Science for Sustainability programme at VUA. For observation at the open settings, I was present at the campus for as long as COVID-19 allowed this and I visited serval pages of the university's website that provided me with more frontstage information. As a participant observer I have been able to experience the workings and practices of several sustainability initiatives at VUA first hand.

Document Analysis: Bryman (2012) argues that certain documents tell us something about what is really going on in organizations and can help us to understand an organizations' culture or ethos. For this research the annual plan for 2020, the quality plan for education 2014-2019 and the institutional plans for the years 2020-2025 and 2015-2020 were analysed. I also received documents and promotion flyers about the projects the GreenOffice is working on and the folders

ICSL uses for promotion. Other documents analysed were available online, these were the Milieubarometerrapport 2018 and the Energy Masterplan 2035. Document analysis helped me to picture VUA's frontstage and understand which sustainable messages VUA wants to bring across and to whom.

The quantitative survey was designed in collaboration with the Green Office for the FSS-GO project for which I volunteered. The project aims to make the FSS a more sustainable department. The survey design is included in Appendix B. The survey design used was a 'descriptive survey method'. Its structured design makes it possible that the collected information can be statistically inferred on a population, enabling the researcher to generalize the outcomes (Salaria, 2012). This research method was used to better define opinions of respondents on sustainability at the FSS. It was distributed among all of the FSS staff, which has 385 employees (FSW VU, 2020), all of them have been invited to fill out the survey. The survey was available on Qualtrics from April 21st until May 6th, there were two reminders on April 28th and May 1st. There were 83 full responses. The results of the survey were analysed in ATLAS ti where the answers were transcribed, coded and triangulated with the analysis of the quantitative research. This gave an insight in FSS staff opinions and expectations towards sustainability at VUA.

Empirical Findings: A Fairy-Tale Come True?

Once upon a time, there lived a boy called 'Little Thumb'. He was useless, as he was only the size of a man's thumb. He could not help his poor parents earn money. So, one night his parents decided to leave him and his brothers in the woods, they could not provide food for them anymore. But Little Thumb had overheard his parents talking about this plan. That night Little Thumb collected white pebbles so that he could leave a trail in the woods and find the way back home with his brothers. This plan, however smart it was, did not work. It did not solve their parent's poverty. Thus, the following day the children were left behind again. They stumbled upon a house, it was the house of a child-eating ogre and his wife. The wife was kind of heart, she offered them shelter and hid them in the closet to protect them from her husband. But the next day, the hungry ogre found the kids, he chased them down with big steps, made in his 'Seven League Magic Boots'. Little Thumb thought of a plan to tire the ogre. And when he fell asleep, he stole the boots from his feet. The big magic boots changed form to fit Little Thumb's small feet. His brothers and sisters held onto him and in seven big steps they were back home again. This time with a solution for their parent's poverty. Little Thumb became a messenger for the king, delivering messages faster than anyone, earning enough money to buy food for his family.

Charles Perrault (1697).

The story of Little Thumb functions as a metaphor to tell the story of VUA's sustainability initiatives. This chapter will start with outlining the wicked problems of VUA, staff and students. The wickedness of their problems around sustainability are compared to the wicked problem of poverty that the parents of Little Thumb faced. Staff and students are portrayed as Little Thumb's, as they find themselves in comparable positions. Power positions are taken into account, these are often present in fairy-tales and also in the findings of this research. In comparison to staff and students, VUA is the ogre. The university is the bearer of the Seven League Magic Boots, the sustainability initiatives that can help make some bigger steps. To conclude, it is questioned whether VUA is not just telling a sustainability fairy-tale and if this fairy-tale has a happy ending or not.

Sustainability – The Wicked Problem to Solve

Poverty was such a big and complicated problem for the parents of Little Thumb, it was their wicked problem. Problems and problem solving are often the major parts of the story lines of fairy-tales. These problems can be used as metaphors for real life-problems (De Vries, 2016). Issues around sustainability are wicked too. In an attempt to offer organizations some handles while solving complicated sustainability issues, the United

Nations developed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2020). VUA tries to contribute to these SDGs, and defines sustainable development as follows:

"Sustainable development involves achieving an ideal balance between economic interests (profit), ecology (planet) and social concerns (people). This is not just of concern in the here and now, but also in the 'there' and 'later', with relevance abroad (particularly in developing countries) and for future generations" (VUA, 2020).

Both VUA and the WCED try to show with their definitions of 'sustainable development' that sustainability is a broad concept. The globally accepted definition of sustainable development by the WCED is: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p.43). The definitions of both organizations show that sustainability is about more than the environment and express concern for future generations.

VUA students too seem to recognize that striving towards a more sustainable world is necessary. Most students associated sustainability with 'caring for our planet' and 'making the world a better place', after which they too mentioned that sustainability is a broad concept, in line with WCED and VUA. One student explained her personal view on the concept:

"[F]or me personally [sustainability] is bigger than just the environment. [Muslims] see sustainability, as something that you should actually keep in mind with everything you do. So, not only dealing with your environment in a very sustainable way, which I naturally also see as sustainability. But in addition to that, also dealing sustainably with the relationships you have with people." (Student 7, May 25, 2020).

Eighteen out of twenty-one interviewed students feel that caring for our planet is an important task. In the next section it will be outlined how staff and students try to deal with this important but wicked task that forms the core of their fairy-tale.

Staff & Students – Little Thumbs

Little Thumb found himself in the least favoured position in his family, as happens often with fairy-tale protagonists (Ashliman, 2004). Just like Little Thumb, staff and students find themselves in an unfavourable and powerless position. They want to take responsibility in solving the wicked problem, but feel useless while doing so.

Students most mentioned taking on responsibility for creating a more sustainable world by considering their mode of transport, trying to use and buy less plastic, trying to produce less waste, separating the unavoidable waste and eating less or no meat.

Taking responsibility is also something that staff is willing to do. About 60 % indicated that they consider the environmental impact of their trip when deciding which mode of transport to take for work-related trips within Europe. Other ways in which staff members are prepared to work on sustainability at VUA include bringing their own reusable water bottle (88%) and their own reusable mugs (85,5%).

Although staff and students personally take responsibility for living more sustainable, they feel that they cannot do it all by themselves. This is where their powerless and unfavourable position becomes clear:

"I do the basic things that a lot of people will probably say. Separating waste and traveling by bike and train more. You try to take this into account, but I have no illusions that it really changes that much." (Student 7, May 25, 2020)

Statements such as this are often followed by students stating that they think organizations have the ability to make a much bigger impact than separate individuals:

"I think that the government and companies should take responsibility, at the moment it is of course not possible to live CO2 free as a person. So, I think the bigger steps need to be taken on a higher level." (Student 20, April 9, 2020)

The same feelings and experiences are voiced by FSS staff. They are prepared to consider a more environmentally friendly mode of transport for going on a work-related trip. But when it comes to actually doing so, there are obstacles they cannot overcome individually:

"Recently I checked if I could go to Austria by train but the cost and time it would take were so much that it was not really a possibility." (Staff member, survey answer, May 6, 2020)

The above thus clearly illustrates that individual effort can only reach so far. This makes the sustainability efforts of staff and students feel just as useless as Little Thumb felt before he found the 'Seven League Magic Boots'.

Big vs. Small – Power positions

As for many fairy tale protagonists, overcoming the disadvantages of their power position in order to solve the wicked problem at hand forms a challenge (Zipes, 1975). The first time the children were left in the woods, they made it back home thanks to the white pebbles, but the problem of poverty was not solved. Little Thumb's power position was still too weak and small to really help his family.

Staff and students, VUA's Little Thumbs, also find themselves struggling with their power position. The individual efforts they make may have a small impact on their own conscience, but these efforts do not solve as much of the complicated issues surrounding sustainably as they wish to solve. They are resourceful and have come up with smart and creative ideas to live more sustainably, the outcomes feel good and are valued. But like the outcomes of following the trail of pebbles, these solutions are not enough.

Organizations can help individuals to pool efforts and reach otherwise impossible goals by stimulating collective action. Students think it is part of the university's role to stimulate collective action on sustainability issues and offer help and support in order to make bigger steps:

"I think we should really work on [sustainability] as a collective. I can reach more with that than by doing small things. I picture [collective action] as an organization, like VUA, taking their responsibility. I would work harder in a collective than I would individually" (Student 7, May 25, 2020)

The second time Little Thumb and his brothers were abandoned in the woods, Little Thumb knew that he needed a solution to his parents' poverty. To reach his goal, Little Thumb had to change his power position in relation to the ogre. The ogre is part of the solution is this fairy tale, he is in possession of the magic boots that eventually bring wealth and prosperity back home (De Vries, 2016). Little Thumb diminished the power ratio by tiring out the ogre, making him less powerful, giving Little Thumb a bigger chance to win.

The students and staff of the FSS too, are struggling to change their power position. As separate individuals they find they have too little power to make a change towards solving the wicked problem of sustainability. VUA is the ogre in this case of sustainability at the university and claims to be in possession of the magic boots that can help the VUA's Little Thumbs to make bigger steps. So, which 'Seven League Magic Boots' claims VUA to possess?

Sustainability at VUA – The 'Ogre' with The Seven League Magic Boots

Science for Sustainability is one out of four profile themes VUA is basing their mission and vision on. The profile theme Science for Sustainability is claimed to be designed with the purpose to contribute to the SDGs Good Health and Well-Being, Quality Education, Affordable and Clean Energy, Reduced Inequalities and Climate Action (VUA, 2020):

"With this theme, we aim to create the conditions under which people, the environment and the economy come into balance without exhausting the earth. We do this, for example, by connecting fundamental scientific knowledge with knowledge about implementing sustainable changes in society. Science for

Sustainability is a multidisciplinary theme, involving several faculties and parts of VUA business operations." (VUA, Institutional Plan 2020-2025).

The efforts put into SDG 13 by VUA seem to be impressive, VUA has been awarded the 2nd place in the THE Impact Ranking for SDG 13. The UN defines SDG 13 as the need to 'take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts' (UN, 2020). VUA itself states that this high ranking was mainly achieved by its "attention for the core theme Science for Sustainability" (VUA, 2020). Outlined here are the 4 pointers that the THE Impact Ranking (2020) bases the scores for the ranking on, combined with sustainability initiatives at VUA that might have contributed to a high score:

- **Research (27%):** an analysis of a query of keywords associated with the goal 'Climate Action' of all indexed publications between 2014 and 2018 (Figure 1). VUA houses five research institutes that focus their research on sustainability: The Institute for Environmental Studies, Amsterdam Sustainability Institute, Athena Institute, Environmental Humanities Centre and Amsterdam Water Science (VUA-Amsterdam 2020) and there is the Green Office that conducts sustainability research with the help of volunteers.

- **Carbon neutrality (23%):** the university's carbon neutrality was measured; institutions provide information to indicate whether they are working on achieving this or whether they have already achieved carbon neutrality. VUA has set up a strategy for striving towards carbon neutrality in their institutional plan for 2020-2025.

- **Energy (27%):** calculated by the amount of low-carbon and renewable energy used by the university. These are issues VUA claims to be actively working on. In its 'Energy Masterplan 2035' VUA outlines how they plan a transition towards 100% sustainable energy by 2035 (VUA, 2017). More changes surrounding

energy transition are outlined in the Campus Masterplan (VUA, 2014) and a transition to green energy and green or greener buildings is outlined in the institutional plan for 2020-2025 (VUA, 2020).

- **Environmental education measures (23%):** calculated by evaluating environmental

- education measures such as campaigns and initiatives, for which evidence is provided by the university itself. The VUA's 10 Bachelor's programmes, 9 Minors and 19 Master's programmes that are said to focus on issues relevant to the SDG 13 'Climate Action' might have contributed to the score here. In addition, VUA offers the option for students and professionals to take part in the modules 'A Broader Mind' and 'Interdisciplinary Community Service Learning' (ICSL). These education programmes are claimed to offer a sustainable future-proof teaching method, focusing on the resolving of multi-faceted 21st century global challenges (VUA, 2020).

When looking at the high ranking of VUA, one is led to believe that the university is publishing a great amount of sustainability research, is striving towards carbon neutrality and using renewable and/or low-carbon energy and is able to provide evidence for environmental education measures. In the next parts of this chapter, it will become clear whether this frontstage presentation of the initiatives are the 'Seven League Magic Boots' that the Little Thumbs of this story need, or if they are still just white pebbles, a seemingly nice solution but actually not what is really needed.

Figure 1: SDG-Dashboard (VU, 2019)
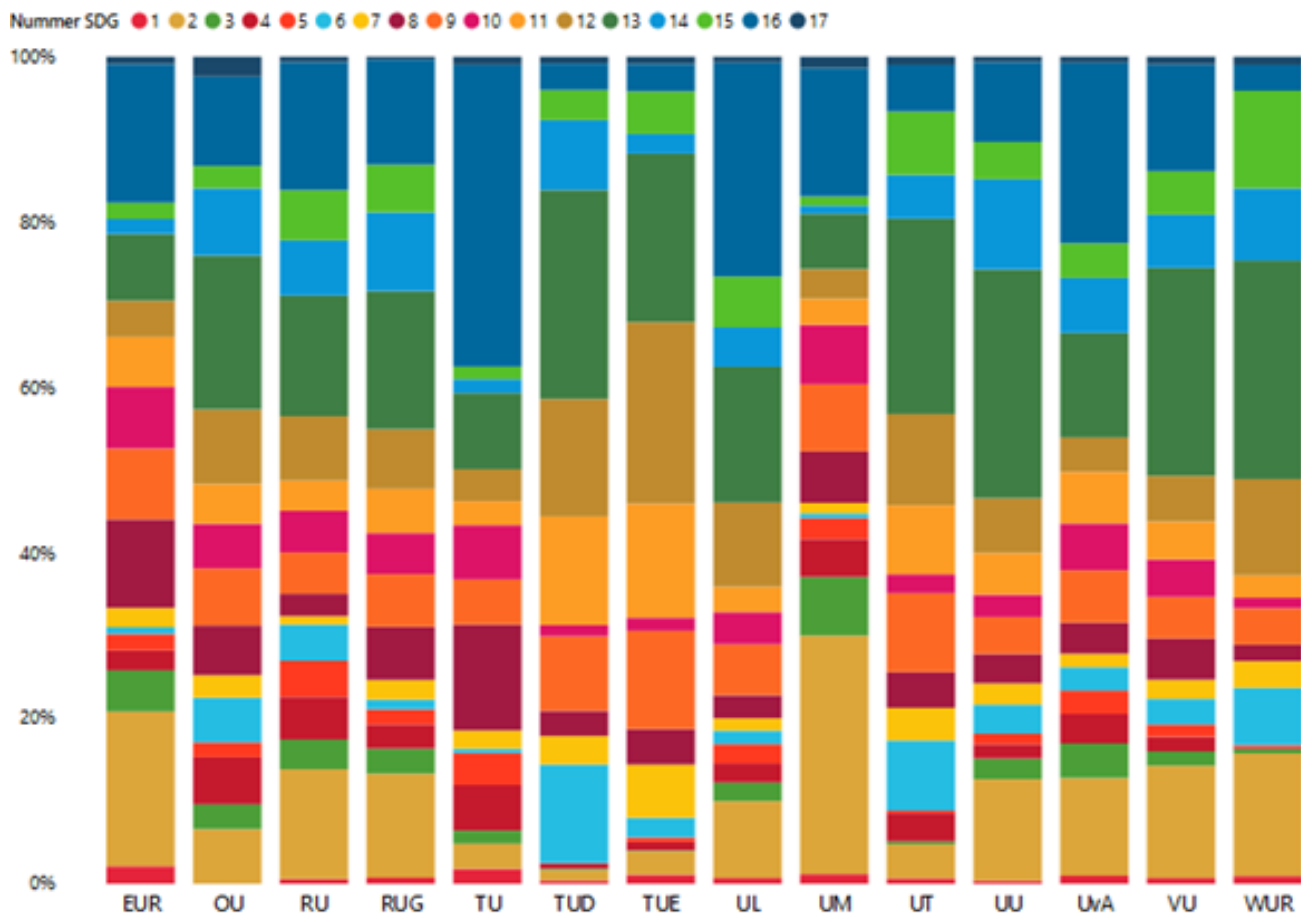
Overcoming Obstacles – Trying to Acquire the Boots

Little Thumb changed the relative power position between himself and the ogre, acquired 'the Seven League Magic Boots' and solved the problem of poverty. Just like Little Thumb, staff and students are struggling with their lack of power and want to change their power position to be able to make a bigger impact. They need the Seven League Magics Boots VUA claims to possess. But staff and students do not seem to be experiencing sustainability at the university as something that helps them make some bigger steps together, take for example this comment made by a student about the Green Office:

"I really like the fact that there is an office, they have this downstairs, this specific sustainability office." (Student 1, May 23, 2020)

But when students are asked whether they know what the Green Office actually does or what they think about the office in general, answers like the following are often given:

"I know that there is a Green Office, but what they exactly do. I have actually no idea." (Student 3, May 24, 2020)

"But weirdly enough what I remember about [the Green Office] is that it is always empty." (Student 9, May 26, 2020)

Integrating sustainability in education is according to VUA another way in which they try to contribute to solving sustainability issues. When I asked my four fellow ICSL students how they found information about the ICSL course before they joined, three of them answered that it was via their thesis supervisors. Before this, they were unaware of this course. This comes

across as a very inefficient way of promoting the course. The Athena Institute claims that a lot has been done to reach Master's students. They told me that flyers and posters were spread around the campus and presentations were held during lectures. Then why did three of my teammates and myself had to hear about the course via our supervisors?

Another illustration of invisibility of initiatives is illustrated by the next quote, this time with regards to the Campus Masterplan and the Energy Masterplan:

"I do see that more and more changes are coming, including the new building for example. Although that is not so much linked to sustainability, but for the rest I cannot really mention what VUA does or what they are working on. It doesn't reach me." (Student, personal communication, March 30, 2020)

This quote in quite telling, the student claims to see changes at VUA campus. She mentions the New University Building, but states that this does not have anything to do with sustainability while VUA itself is proudly claiming that this building meets the standards to reach the level 'good' according to BREEAM-NL (VUA, 2020). This is thus not something that is experienced as visible enough for this student.

The 'boots' that the university claims to be offering remain invisible to staff and students. They experience a discrepancy between VUA's frontstage and backstage with regards to sustainability accounting. The frontstage of VUA's sustainability initiatives as presented to the THE Impact Ranking jury was awarded the second price. But at the backstage the experiences are different when staff and students are asked about these award-winning initiatives, they do not experience them as very present or visible enough, some have never heard of VUA's sustainability initiatives. This discrepancy due to invisibility is the main obstacle that staff, students and VUA have to overcome.

A Happy Ending? – Possibilities for Change & Renewal at VUA

Little Thumb is a symbol for hope of change and renewal. The weakest persons often are the ones who become the heroes in the end, symbolling a process of maturing and growing into success after overcoming obstacles (Herrero-Ruiz, 2006). This would imply that the Little Thumbs of VUA could become their own heroes by overcoming their weak power position.

VUA is telling a sustainable fairy-tale to its staff and students. To acquire the 'Seven League Magic Boots' the Little Thumbs and the ogre have to change their power position by forming a coalition and taking on collective action. Only if the low-power players bundle their efforts, they can contribute to solving the wicked problems around sustainability by making bigger steps as a strong coalition. VUA – the (more friendly and non-child eating) ogre – claims to be the possessor of the boots that form the key to solve the problems of the Little Thumbs. VUA can help students and staff to overcome their weak power position and make them more powerful by creating a coalition with a big enough critical mass so that low-power actors can put on their boots and make bigger steps.

The easiest way in which the university can do this is by making its initiatives more visible. During the research it was proposed multiple times that VUA could create one sustainability webpage that is easily accessible through VUnet or Canvas. A perfect physical place to inform staff and students about the existence of this new website, seems to be the toilet:

"Most communication for me, about random things from VUA, happens at the toilets. Because there you always have these posters on the toilet door and those often show useful information." (Student 21, April 10, 2020)

The perfect time to inform new students is the introduction week:

"I think it's always a good way to try to incorporate more in the introduction week. […] Because in the beginning the year you're always really open minded and curious." (Student 13, March 27, 2020)

But truly sustainable universities should be educating its students on the topic, education is after all the core task of a university. Eight students expressed interest in more lectures on sustainability that are relevant for their discipline multiple times, for example:

"I really liked that in our COM Master's, I don't know what the lecture was called, but it was about sustainability […] We learnt how to talk about sustainability in organizations […]. I think on a small scale you can try to incorporate sustainable topics more in the everyday schedule. I mean in politics you could also teach your students about how you do politics in a sustainable environment. You can apply it to every topic, every Master's program and every Bachelor's program. Even if you learn education and you want to be a teacher in the future you can apply that. I think there is always some space to do that." (Student, personal communication, March 27, 2020)

By offering more education on sustainability, the university can do what it does best: educate people. To reach all VUA students, education on sustainability should be made more accessible by integrating it into already existing mandatory courses of all Bachelor's and Master's programmes taught at VUA. Rather than offering extracurricular optional courses like the ICSL courses or offering just a few Bachelor's and Master's programmes focussing on the issue that do not reach everyone. Students think it is important to learn more about sustainability in connection with their discipline and believe that sustainability can be connected with every discipline in a relevant way.

This solution makes sure that staff as well as students become more actively engaged in the sustainability practices of VUA that evolve around research and education. Students receive education that is relevant for solving the wicked problem, staff gets an opportunity to integrate sustainability in their research, which might also make more students interested in researching sustainability.

This changes the power position of the Little Thumbs, they gain more strength in the form of knowledge, with which they can create awareness around sustainability problems throughout society. This causes their coalition to become stronger, making them able to create a critical mass so that more individuals inside and outside of VUA are willing to work harder for a sustainable world. Offering such education makes it possible for VUA to create more understanding of the wicked problem of sustainability and creates more space and opportunities to work towards possible solutions. These are the big steps that VUA's Little Thumbs are asking for.

Conclusion

The findings of this research have pointed out that staff and students as individuals feel they cannot make an impact on sustainability that they find big enough, they are Little Thumbs. The wicked problem is too big, ambiguous, complicated and multi-faceted to solve alone. They want VUA to help them with making the bigger steps by stimulating collective action. To do this, the power position of the Little Thumbs has to change. They have to gain knowledge to gain power and create a coalition so that this coalition can form a critical mass and stimulate collective action to solve the wicked problem. This way, the efforts of different actors on sustainability at VUA can be pooled and a bigger impact can be made.

VUA claims to possess 'Seven League Magic Boots' in the form of sustainability initiatives to make these bigger steps. With these boots, VUA can stimulate collective action by creating a critical mass through actively involving more staff and students in the initiatives and by making staff and students aware of the advantages of the sustainable world they get in return. But at this moment, staff and students experience the sustainability initiatives of VUA as tokenistic. They feel as if the treatment of the wicked problem of sustainability at VUA as it is presented on the frontstage is a fairy-tale and not in accordance with VUA's backstage. This, taken together with their feelings of relative powerlessness, makes experiences of staff and

students of the FSS with sustainability VUA not very positive.

The inconvenient truth is that, according to the staff and students of the FSS, VUA puts up a façade in the form of a Green Wall to the outside world by using impression management. They present a sustainable fairy-tale to the outside world. Its impression management is good enough to be awarded the 2nd place in the THE Impact Ranking. The frontstage fairy-tale of VUA's sustainability accounting seems very impressive. Nevertheless, staff and students do not experience this impact at the backstage, which consists of the daily practices at VUA. In order to really contribute to solving the wicked problems around sustainability, VUA has to present its initiatives more clearly towards staff and students and actively engage them in the process. VUA can do this by communicating about the initiative through one central webpage on which all initiatives are stated and explained, communicating during introduction weeks and via poster in the toilets. But most importantly, by providing education on sustainability that is relevant to the education programmes of VUA. By integrating sustainability in the education programmes, it is made sure that staff as well as students gain knowledge about sustainability and experience the possibility of working towards a more sustainable world at VUA.

The VUA can bring this fairy-tale to a happy ending by, indeed, ending it and making staff and students experience their university as a truly sustainable one. One that makes them see and feel that their impact is worthy of this 2nd place in the THE Impact Ranking. The VUA should turn its Green Wall inside out and transform it into Green Lecture Halls. This creates opportunities for the Little Thumbs to gain power in the form of knowledge and involvement in a powerful coalition. They can put on their magic boots and make the bigger steps towards a more sustainable world as a collective.

Discussion

The urge to solve the wicked problem of sustainability that the WCED recognized decades ago and for which

the UN established a worldwide agenda is also recognized by VUA. At least if we are to believe the website and the analysed documents. The VUA even managed to be awarded the second place for its efforts on combatting climate change in the THE Impact Ranking. This gives the impression that VUA is an impactful university, successfully paving the way towards a more sustainable society everywhere and for everyone now and in the future. This is its frontstage, it is the impression VUA gives to the outside world (Goffman, 1959).

At this frontstage VUA is presenting its efforts for taking on social responsibility as an organization. By doing so, VUA creates an organizational façade that reassures the legitimacy of its sustainability policies and practices, they build a Green Wall (Tata & Prasad, 2014). However, when we take a look at the backstage of VUA's sustainability practices, it becomes clear that this Green Wall is indeed just a façade. Staff and students of the FSS in the backstage do not experience VUA as sustainable as it claims to be on the frontstage.

These individual Little Thumbs desire collective action so that they gain power and can make bigger steps towards a more sustainable world. Stimulating this collective action is something they expect from their university, as VUA claims to have the boots they need to make a bigger impact. One way to start collective action is by creating a critical mass that strives towards a sustainable VUA (Marwell & Oliver, 1985).

VUA is in possession of 'Seven League Magic Boots' that can help the Little Thumbs to make bigger steps and contribute more to the public good of creating more sustainability. The power position of staff and students has to change before they can make use of these boots. With the help of collective action stimulated by VUA, the individual efforts of staff and students can be bundled to make a bigger impact and reach otherwise impossible goals. But before this can happen, VUA has to work on tearing down its Green Wall and becoming a sustainable organization at its core.

By acquiring these boots that VUA possesses, the individual Little Thumbs become more powerful than they were before. With the help of VUA, staff and students can pool their efforts and make a bigger impact. They gain knowledge about how VUA addresses the wicked problem of sustainability and about how they can address sustainability in their personal lives and careers. They can form a critical mass and form a collective to take action against climate change so that they can make a bigger impact together, maybe even outside of VUA.

Lastly, I would like to mention that this research is of course focussed on the situation at VUA. In this case, VUA is an ogre, but when we take a look from a global perspective VUA is also just a Little Thumb and a low-power actor trying its best to deal with a multi-faceted, ambiguous and wicked problem in which different groups of actors have conflicting interests. All actors are powerful and powerless at the same time, depending on contexts in which relative power position may differ.

Limitations

This study has focussed solely on the experiences of members of the Faculty of Social Sciences. This can paint a skewed image of how sustainability is experienced at VUA as a whole. Secondly, education on sustainability that is relevant to the student's discipline can teach valuable lessons and bring knowledge and awareness that the student might take with them into a future career. Teaching every student on sustainability now might affect the future of whole sectors later. But, like all sustainability initiatives, this too can be used as a façade. Advertising with educating students on sustainability can make the university look greener, which might attract more students and employees. But if the university continues to put too little time and effort in education on sustainability this will only make the discrepancy between the frontstage and backstage bigger and the Green Wall higher.

Implications

One theoretical implication of this research is that it answers the call of Ball and Grubnick (2007) for more awareness of the leading position of PSOs in the process of creating a more sustainable future. Secondly, it answers their call for qualitative research of PSOs to understand sustainability accounting and accountability in such organizations. This research shines a light on the experiences of members of a PSO with the sustainability accounting of this PSO. It helps in filling this theorethical gap and works towards a better theoretical understanding of how PSOs are working on sustainability.

A third theorethical implication of this research is that it helps in creating a bigger understanding of wicked problems, linked to the theories of collective action and playing strengths. These complicated issues have been explained with the use of metaphor to create a new way of understanding the wicked problems which might help researchers to gain new insights.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research for VUA as an organization can focus on other faculties, this will complement the current research and create a more precise and diverse image of the experiences of staff and students with the sustainability initiatives of VUA. Another option is to research the experiences with sustainability at this university again after several changes have been made by VUA in its sustainability practices and policies. By doing this, it will become clear whether these changes had positive effects on the experiences of staff and students. Lastly, future research might focus on the impact of sustainability in education on students and their careers. This can be done by interviewing students that graduated five or more years ago about the impact of such education on their daily work practices.

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