

15th of December 2017

Subject: Constructive Feedback on the ETH-Sustainability Report 2015/2016

In the ETH Sustainability Report 2015/2016 is stated that the “expression of opinions is part of ETH Zurich’s institutional identity and is a key factor behind the high level of motivation among all members of the university.” We as students agree and are happy to confirm that we do meet openness for constructive dialogue all over ETH. Furthermore, we are delighted about the launch of the Mobility Platform in 2016, with the aim of “setting up a comprehensive mobility management strategy for the university”, now focusing at the issue of air travel. We gladly support the general attitude of ETH that “universities have not only a great opportunity, but also a responsibility towards society to develop innovative solutions for challenges facing mankind, support their implementation, and thereby help prepare the path for a sustainable development of present and future generations”. This mentioned responsibility motivates us students to push intentions even further and refer to several issues that – in our eyes – constitute space for further improvement:

General issues

- The layout of the report is rather unattractive; goals, figures and measures are not presented vividly. The report looks rather uninspiring and is comparably hard to read. Good examples in terms of layout can be found in the sustainability reports of the Universities of Cambridge or Harvard. ¹
- Many goals in the report are not measurable and come without a real message. For example “reduce emissions continuously” or “reduce fuel consumption continuously” – what is the year of reference? What is the reduction rate? When should the goal be reached? These questions remain unclear.
- Many general statements are presented to describe a living culture, already part of ETH. At present, many of them are only good intentions rather than reality. For example: “ETH Zurich trains the next generation of professionals and experts to actively incorporate aspects of sustainability in their professional lives”. This is only partially true in our eyes. We do not think that this training – if at all – is happening at an adequate level. The term „sustainability“ is obviously a very elastic one, especially as it is used throughout the report.

Research

- The report states that many of the 50 spin-off companies within the period 2015/2016 operate to support sustainable development. Here, we question the obviously very loose definition of “sustainable development” and/or miss a clear explication.
- The statement that “many researchers are engaged in interdisciplinary projects” irritates us: how many are “many” and in what sense are the projects

¹ <https://green.harvard.edu/sites/green.harvard.edu/files/Harvard%20Sustainability%20Plan-Web.pdf>

“interdisciplinary”? In our eyes it is not per definition that every interdisciplinary work also results in sustainable projects.

Education

- “In all of its educational offerings, ETH Zurich stresses the relevance of the capacity for system-oriented, independent, and critical thinking”. Stressing the relevance does not ensure that capacities are created among students. That system-oriented, independent, and critical thinking should be part of education is a formidable goal, but at present absolutely not true for *all* educational offerings.
- The very existence of a Critical Thinking Initiative leads us to the assumption that there are some fundamental problems with these issues that need to be fixed. From our point of view, the “cross-departmental sustainability and critical thinking-related educational activities at ETH Zurich” have not been very successful.
- ETH Zurich claims to “actively incorporate aspects of sustainability in [the students’] lives”. This is a good intention, but not reality. Topics of sustainability are not part of every student’s curriculum. The goal of “implementing sustainability in all departments/curricula” is still in far distance. From our point of view, the reality is that most students take “Science-in-Perspective”-Courses that have the smallest workload, rather than following the intention of widening their horizon.
- The goal to “provide a platform for students to tackle sustainability-specific questions with practice partners from public and private sectors” is definitely not on track. In 2015 and 2016 combined, seven Bachelor and Master theses were written and finalized within the project platform ETH Seed Sustainability. Of the Master theses, four had an interdisciplinary research design. Relative to the size of ETH, these numbers cannot be called a success.

People

- No goals are achieved regarding the intention of increasing the gender balance at all levels of the academic career. In our eyes, this is a poor result.

Campus

- 100% “green” electricity appears to be great, but in what way is it also certified renewable electricity? We wonder why only 4 GWh for Honggerberg are certified by ‘naturemade star’.
- The biggest issue concerning printing is that flag-pages still cannot be turned off within the new system. A vast amount of flag-pages end up in the bins of ETH every day. The claimed increase of the proportion of “recycled paper” is questionable: FSC certified paper is not equivalent to recycled paper.
- The goals on waste are not reached at all: Any plans of “recycling days and weeks” are new to us and thus need to be promoted much more. That remaining equipment is prepared for „external sale by a broker“ does not seem to be a sustainable way at all, as the end of the life-cycle cannot be ensured to be sustainable. An innovative students PC recycling project was not supported by ETH.

- The energy-related dialog with employees, students, and the public that ETH wants to encourage still has very little visibility. We think more interactive measures are needed in order to make people change their behavior.
- Concerning food at ETH, we see no visible consequences from the (non binding) recommendations to caterers. From our point of view there is neither a promotion of climate-friendly meal choices nor a systematic framework for reducing greenhouse gas emissions produced by the food sector.
- The current interpretation of ETH's "sustainable financial policy" seems not to include any environmental or social measures, but defines "sustainability" simply as economical long-term stability. It is absolutely not clear how "sustainability-related aspects are taken into account in asset management decisions".
- The current efforts of "science meets policy" are a starting point. However, in important issues, like climate change, fake-news remain a lasting issue. Like in the USA, similar trends can also be observed in Switzerland.² ETH could and should inform society much more on sustainability-related topics, e.g. by extending the successful "Zukunftsblog".

Again, we want to stress our intention of a constructive dialogue. We would be happy to contribute to solutions of the issues we addressed above.

Thank you in anticipation for considering our concerns,

for [project21]

for the management board of VSETH

Simon Wahl | member of the Sustainability Commission of VSETH

Lars Sturm | University politics

² <https://www.ethz.ch/en/news-and-events/eth-news/news/2016/11/where-are-the-facts.html>