The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association’s Submission to the University of Melbourne’s Draft Sustainability Charter

December 2015

Submitted by:

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Executive Summary

The University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association (GSA) welcomes the wide-ranging scope of the draft Sustainability Charter and the effort of the University of Melbourne to consult with its staff and students in addressing the great challenge of sustainability.

As the representative voice for over 30,000 graduate students at the University of Melbourne, GSA seeks to empower and enfranchise the views and opinions of graduate students. We understand that the Sustainability Executive intends to finalise the draft Sustainability Charter after calling for general consultation with staff and students. This submission is intended to aid this process by proffering a detailed and cohesive response informed by the organisation’s own consultation and research. It contains the following recommendations:

1. That the role of student representatives continues to be supported as an integral part of the ‘planning, decision-making and governance framework required to enact the commitments of this Charter’.

2. That when finalising the Sustainability Charter the specific governance of the document be clarified, to indicate how it would, in the future, be changed or located within University governance and how it operates within governance, management and operations.

3. That going forward the Sustainability Executive work with the Chancellery and the University Secretary to update information on governance to publish to a general audience. This would include where the Sustainability Executive reports to and how it functions within University governance. The visibility and accountability of the Sustainability Executive as a leading body of sustainability is obviously important.

4. That an appropriate and clear timeframe for consultation and events associated with it be determined by early next year for the implementation plan. Student and staff representatives and the Sustainability Engagement Working Group should be consulted in planning this to best effect.

5. That as befits a public-spirited institution there is a call for researched and public submissions from organisations, including student and staff organisations, to help inform the Sustainability Executive’s finalisation of the plan to follow the Charter.

6. That the Sustainability Engagement Working Group, student and staff organisations, representatives and other groups all be consulted and involved in driving better engagement and participation from students and staff in sustainability.
7. That the release of internal information broadly relevant to sustainability be improved and that this is addressed as one of the priorities in the Sustainability Charter’s implementation.

GSA trusts that the Sustainability Executive will welcome and consider these detailed recommendations, and looks forward to supporting continuing efforts to ensure that the University of Melbourne is, in the words of the draft Sustainability Charter, ‘an international exemplar of a fully sustainable community’.
Preamble

Public-minded submissions from representative bodies are important and the issue of sustainability is itself of global significance. The University is a ‘public-spirited university’, as the University’s strategic plan puts it, and with the student body present, ‘the Parkville campus is the fifth-largest city in Victoria in terms of population’. As the third Growing Esteem further notes, ‘a great university is global in impact and influence’, and it is the students of the university that give it a large measure of its impact and influence.¹

This submission draws on the consultation we have undertaken since the release of the draft charter in October, which includes:

- Feedback from the general student cohort.
- Detailed input from representative student groups.
- Consultation with other stakeholders.
- Research from our Education and Policy Group.
- Consultation and surveying undertaken already by the University and other groups.
- Internal discussions in which the GSA Council has addressed these issues.

In summarising this material and the results of wide-ranging and detailed consultation, we will:

- Identify the key issues that concern students (p. 9-14).
- Suggest specific word changes to address the most significant gaps in the sustainability charter (p. 17-18).
- Reflect on the process of the charter consultation and decision making (p. 6-8).
- Include a number of recommendations for the process of planning that follows the finalisation of the charter (p. 15-16).

Consultation

In working with graduate students and other members of the University, GSA has strived to complement the University’s own consultation by identifying ways to involve students in the representative process, add greater cohesiveness in working with the community, and to encourage both open and fully-informed responses to the sustainability charter. GSA has undertaken the following:

- A general call for feedback of our own, which encouraged questions to be asked of our leadership.
- An informed discussion at GSA Council in October about the Sustainability Charter but also internal GSA targets for sustainability.
- The publication of a statement of aspirations for the University to promote the Council’s leadership and open up discussion.
- Extensive consultation with the sustainability community through the work of our Arts and Sustainability Liaison.
- A consultation forum which was attended by 30 leaders of student groups, representing groups ranging from academic to activist.

The consultation forum held in November was attended by groups such as Agrifoodies, Earth Sciences Postgraduate Group, Forestry and Ecosystems Student Society, Fossil Free at Melbourne University (FFMU), Greens on Campus, Melbourne University Law Students’ Society, Melbourne University Planning Student Society, Oaktree, Ormond College Students’ Club, Postgraduate Environment Network (PEN), and Student Conservators at Melbourne. The broad-ranging conversation with this groups helped identify a number of the issues that have informed this response.

At the Council meeting held in October, the Council identified the need to produce new guidelines for ethical and sustainable procurement and to set some targets for sustainability independent of the University’s own targets. The Council also endorsed the following aspirations for the University:

- For the University to act as a leader in sustainability, and the University community to become a role model and living laboratory for sustainability;
- For immediate reasonable and evidence-based action on climate change, including targeted divestment from organisations that profit from carbon-intensive supply chains;
- To mandate the disclosure of information about the University’s investments and actions on sustainability so all members of the University community are involved in solving problems; and
For the involvement of graduate students in decision-making, in a way that allows all graduate students the opportunity to participate in solving the challenges of sustainability.

GSA recognises that the University Sustainability Executive has already made welcome attempts to address some of these aspirations and to engage and consult with students and staff following the publication of the draft sustainability charter in October. This has included:

- Announcing the appointment of GSA and UMSU Presidents as representatives on the Sustainability Executive the day before the release of the charter.
- Appointing a consultant to work with staff and stakeholder groups to gain their views in drafting the Charter.
- Holding a consultation event with Sustainable Campus on the South Lawn, as well as a Sustainability Forum to come in December.
- Creating a new webpage and calling for general consultation.
- Responding with some clarity about the consultation process involved in the charter, including by identifying the implementation plan that will follow.

In undertaking our own consultation, we identified a few issues that hampered an otherwise first-rate consultation process and that are useful to address here in order to inform the finalisation of the charter and the implementation plan that follows:

1. A general lack of clarity about the nature of the Sustainability Charter, which included:
   - Confusion about the role of the Charter as an aspirational or operational document.
   - No information about the governance of the Charter or the Sustainability Executive and their relationship.
   - Sketchy information about how the Charter would function as a guide to operations.

2. The perception of a rushed consultation period which was not dispelled by:
   - A failure to consult students about the scheduling of events or consultation during exams or graduations.
   - The appointment of UMSU and GSA to representative positions, long called-for, the day before the draft Sustainability Charter was released.

3. A general lack of broad and real-world knowledge amongst the sustainability cohort about the Sustainability Charter and Sustainability leadership more generally.

4. No call for researched submissions from student or staff organisations that would help inform the Sustainability Executive’s finalisation of the Charter.
Because the aspirations involved in the Sustainability Charter are so broad and the response needed to achieve them is a cohesive one, it is important the University achieves the broadest and most cohesive consultation, engagement and representation. Below we have included a number of recommendations that address some of these consultation issues that we hope will be considered when the charter is finalised (see p. 15-16).
Key Issues

Here we summarise the key issues for our stakeholders and graduate students at the University and suggest ways in which they might be addressed by the Sustainability Charter.

Leadership

A number of University surveys have pointed to the issue of leadership in sustainability as one of the highest priorities. The Sustainability Charter addresses this directly and is one of its most positive and well-received features. The specific promise to ‘build and maintain the planning, decision-making and governance framework required to enact the commitments of this Charter’ is an important one. However, it should be noted that leadership is a specific concept in regards to University governance and a broader one when it also refers to leadership opportunities given to students and graduates, as well as leadership in the community and in education.

The University’s commitment to leadership should involve facilitating the participation of students in leading the community, and supporting the ‘societal leaders’ already in our midst. With the recent release of the University’s Engagement Plan, it is important to acknowledge engagement as another strand of the helix that may not be sufficiently captured by the Charter.

Engagement should include representative leadership, or participation in governance, and an infrastructure which promotes equal management of the learning process by students as well as staff. As the Engagement Plan puts it, the University has a responsibility to provide ‘opportunities for student engagement within and beyond the curriculum, ensuring that we facilitate, support and recognise student engagement across all domains valued by students, staff and our professional advisory boards.’

One of the key ways in which student engagement can be recognised and supported is by placing students as representatives on University boards and committees. There is an important role on campus for bodies such as the Student Representative Network (SRN), jointly organised by GSA and UMSU, that supports students with these opportunities, trains and helps instil the graduate attributes required to contribute to change for sustainability. A recognition of the great importance of leadership and engagement as interrelated activities supported by the management of the organisation is worth including in this Charter in order to guide future implementations of the Charter.

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Targets and operations

Besides leadership, this was the most remarked on feature of the response to the Sustainability Charter. The fact that the Charter is aspirational and broad, and lacks clarity about its role in governance, created some confusion in responses. There was much debate about whether or not targets should be included within the Charter. Nonetheless, almost everyone who responded to the Charter recognised that it was not strictly a pragmatic document and were prepared to acknowledge the difficulty of these issues and the need for more aspirational statements. It is significant sign that the leadership clauses of the Charter hit the right notes that everyone who read it wanted to be involved in or see tangible signs of its implementation.

Accountability

A perceived lack of accountability and transparency by the University was discussed whenever the Sustainability Charter was presented. It is notable that the charter makes transparency, accountability and reporting features of the management of the organisation. Without student engagement with the University’s reporting, or ways in which the University’s accountability can be communicated to students, it is likely that this perceived issue will continue. While a rewording in the charter may address this concern, it is more something to consider in engagement targets in the implementation plan.

Divestment and Financial Sustainability

The University’s recent survey indicated that divestment is the most meaningful commitment the University could take to address climate change, and this joins previous surveying that suggests thousands of students and staff as well as alumni and graduates care about this issue.³

According to the first national polling on investment leadership in a report from The Australia Institute, Leading By Degrees, four in five people agree that universities should invest ethically, while at least three in five agree that this means avoiding fossil fuels. Most alumni also said that they would be more likely to invest in their university if it divested, and two in five said that the leadership of the university would encourage them to switch superannuation funds.⁴

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³ Fossil Free MU conduct a survey of 2000 staff and students that found 97% were in favour of divestment: “Students and Staff Vote Squarely Against Melbourne University Investing in Fossil Fuels”, http://www.fossilfreemuo.org/news/students-and-staff-vote-squarely-against-melbourne-university-investing-in-fossil-fuels24112014. See also the summary of the survey undertaken during the South Lawn Consultation Event, http://sustainablecampus.unimelb.edu.au/about/sustainability-charter.

The issue of divestment inevitably raises the responsibility of the University to be financially responsible with its funds in order to maximise returns. As we heard when we consulted stakeholders and students, however, divestment does not need to be a challenge to long-term financial position, and can in fact be an aid to addressing long-term risks and shorter-term social risks. Universities must demonstrate that they are fulfilling their fiduciary duty in managing climate change risks. Financial management and leadership can no longer skirt climate change or environmental sustainability as an issue. If we are to limit global warming to 2 degrees we may need to wipe off at least $2 trillion worth of global fossil assets from balance sheets: the significance of these stranded assets must be factored into any financial investment.\(^5\) The top two hundred publically-traded companies hold the greatest amount of these assets. Divesting from these companies and more generally pursuing ethical investment may be a way of developing adaptability and resilience, managing risks and diversifying income as much as being fair and sustainable.

Everyone who discusses divestment acknowledges that the issues are complex and that, moreover, the University participates in a wider pool of investors. But as the University’s third Growing Esteem strategic plan suggested last year, financial, organisational and environmental sustainability are all to a great degree interlinked. We cannot necessarily unbundle them but can look at them with due consideration and the need to take immediate actions based on the evidence. The University has a small window of opportunity to show leadership in investment. If it wishes to meet the vision of Growing Esteem to be ‘recognised [by 2020] as a leader in embedding sustainability in all aspects of the University’s operations’, it must acknowledge that other international and domestic universities have already shown leadership in partial or full divestment, including at least two international universities with the great renown, Stanford and Oxford University, and domestically with the Australian National University (ANU).

It has been suggested that one positive way in which the University could show investment leadership is to set benchmarks for the Victorian Funds Management Corporation to meet and to withdraw from them based on failure to meet screening and ethical guidelines within a reasonable timeframe. A commitment to measure the performance of VFMC against strategic financial and sustainable goals and withdraw by 2020 if there is a failure to meet these goals may be one way of ensuring that short-term investment opportunities could be balanced against long-term financial and environmental sustainability.

Another way would be to mandate the release of information about investment, investors and procurement not only to be truly transparent and accountable but also to provide opportunities for all students to participate in solving problems. Much of the debate about divestment is not informed by the particular challenges and financial issues faced by Universities.

In terms of the Sustainability Charter, there was some discussion about changing the wording, such as a helpful suggestion from Fossil Free MU. There was a general agreement that the Charter should reflect the complementarity of investment in sustainability and financial positions.

**Inclusion and Inequality**

The area of social inclusion and inequality were perceived to be some of the biggest gaps in the wording of the Sustainability Charter. It was seen as important that these be addressed. The University’s own Engagement Plan notes, ‘the Melbourne experience is one to be shared by the most talented students, irrespective of their background.’ A commitment to social inclusion and equity cannot be neglected in a charter that encompasses sustainability. As PEN, Oaktree, and others pointed out:

- The Charter does not detail how the University will help alleviate the effects of climate change on developing nations
- There is no reference to the Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders as traditional owners of the Australian land or the role of Indigenous people more broadly
- Social inclusion is not specifically identified in the Charter

In regards to the first point, it is easy to neglect the commitment to the principle of ‘Equity, in the use of global resources’ outlined in the Charter. Because the Charter is a holistic expression of ‘six fundamental principles’, it is important that the commitments return to the principle of equity more directly and identify that ‘innovative solutions to sustainability challenges’ may not sufficiently address developing nations or inequality.

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In our consultation, the recognition of the traditional owners of the land was acknowledged as integral to sustainability and to the awareness of the ‘Earth as a finite environment whose physical systems are tightly interconnected with all life’. There was some discussion of the implementation plan integrating itself with the University of Melbourne’s Reconciliation Action Plan, which was created by Murrup Barak, and Indigenous Carbon Credits being included. The neglect of Indigenous peoples in the Charter was generally received as an unhelpful omission that should be corrected. While an inclusion into the Charter of specific traditional owners such as the Wurundjeri people may be complex, it is worth an inclusion of indigenous people to demonstrate the formality and value of the Charter. Some inspiration might be gained by the following words:

*Recognizing* the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources,

[...]

*Recognizing* that respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment

Alongside the importance of a recognition of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, social inclusion more generally was perceived as important not only on its own but also in solving the challenge of sustainability. An inclusive society allows the very kind of equitable sharing of resources that must take place to ensure sustainability.

**Biodiversity, Ecosystems, and Green Infrastructure**

The role of biodiversity was discussed in consultation with students, which threw up a number of issues. Whether biodiversity needed to be included was opened to debate, and given the University’s operational commitments it was concluded that if it was included it should be aspirational in nature in informing the University’s relationship to partners. One noticeable absence in the charter was green infrastructure. It was seen as important that the Charter involve a principle about ‘opportunities to embed sustainability objectives in infrastructure planning and service delivery’ (*Growing Esteem* 2014: 11), even though the University was already involved in undertaking this. It was seen as important to cultivate a biodiverse campus, but this was weighed against the need to centralise people and resources.

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The role of forestry was also raised by the Forestry and Ecosystems Student Group, and there was some mention of the OneHealth paradigm as bridging biodiversity and health issues in humans and animals. The issue of the connection between animal agriculture and sustainability was also seen as an academic one, through the lens of scientific research.

Commitments to these research areas solving sustainable challenges may be entailed in the charter on the level of principle, but some stronger mention of these issues may be found in the wording of the Charter. It was also suggested that procurement, investors and partners, all played a role in determining the University’s impact on sustainability in these areas, and should also be addressed in the implementation plan.

**Resilience and adaptability**

Resilience and adaptability were also raised when students were consulted (see Appendix: Sustainability Consultation Charter Meeting Summary). The role of the University was clearly to provide leadership in these areas and to support the resilience and adaptability of the world as an equitable infrastructure, and the University campus as a model.
Looking Forward

Consultation with students, including the detailed feedback provided by leaders of the student community, generated lively discussions and raised a number of issues that were underrepresented in the Sustainability Charter. Some specific rewording suggestions for the Sustainability Charter are provided in the appendix below, as well as the summary of the consultation meeting we held in November.

GSA hopes to continue working on consultation in the area of sustainability alongside the University. In looking forward to the finalisation of the Sustainability Charter and the beginning of consultation for its implementation, GSA presents the following recommendations to be considered by the Sustainability Executive:

1. That the role of student representatives continues to be supported as an integral part of the ‘planning, decision-making and governance framework required to enact the commitments of this Charter’.

2. That when finalising the Sustainability Charter the specific governance of the document be clarified, to indicate how it would, in the future, be changed or located within University governance and how it operates within governance, management and operations (see Appendix: Sustainability Governance).

3. That going forward the Sustainability Executive work with the Chancellery and the University Secretary to update information on governance to publish to a general audience. This would include where the Executive reports to and how it functions within University governance (see Appendix: Sustainability Governance for GSA’s attempt to sketch this out). The visibility and accountability of the Sustainability Executive as a leading body of sustainability is obviously important.

4. That an appropriate and clear timeframe for consultation and events associated with it be determined by early next year for the implementation plan. Student and staff representatives and the Sustainability Engagement Working Group should be consulted in planning this to best effect.

5. That as befits a public-spirited institution there is a call for researched and public submissions from organisations, including student and staff organisations, to help inform the Sustainability Executive’s finalisation of the plan to follow the Charter.

6. That the Sustainability Engagement Working Group, student and staff organisations, representatives and other groups all be consulted and involved in driving better engagement and participation from students and staff in sustainability.
7. That the release of internal information broadly relevant to sustainability be improved and that this is addressed as one of the priorities in the Sustainability Charter’s implementation.
Appendix: Charter Rewording Suggestions

The University of Melbourne
Sustainability Charter for Consultation
[draft as at 12 October]

The Earth is a finite environment whose physical systems are tightly interconnected with all life on the planet. Humanity is now in the historic position of changing the global balance of both the physical and biological environments, with unintended consequences.

As a distinguished research and teaching institution, The University of Melbourne has a social responsibility to lead public debate and action towards a sustainable future.

Through knowledge, imagination and action the University will help shape a sustainable planet. The University will be an international exemplar of a fully sustainable community in all of its activities.

The University’s commitments are based on six fundamental principles:
• Leadership, through example, globally, nationally and locally;
• Interdisciplinary research, integrating knowledge from wide-ranging disciplines;
• Active global citizenship, for all students and staff;
• Equity, in the use of global resources;
• Transparency and accountability, in all institutional decision-making and activity; and
• Action, urgent if necessary

As committed to in Growing Esteem, this Charter frames sustainability values and principles to be embedded throughout the University’s operations, and identifies the commitments required to achieve a sustainable society. In delivering the objectives embodied in the Charter, we will fulfill the aspiration of the University’s motto: *postera crescam laude* – we shall grow in the esteem of future generations.

**COMMITMENTS**

Research underpins the University’s contribution to creating positive social change. The University will:
• conduct research that contributes significantly to knowledge and action across the interdisciplinary dimensions of sustainability;
• support researchers across different fields to work collectively on environmental problems; and
• use sustainability principles to guide decisions about research funding, conduct and communication.

Graduates of the University are active, informed citizens who contribute to change for sustainability. The University will:
• offer an education that enables graduates from all disciplines to develop knowledge, values and skills to be societal leaders;
• provide specialist interdisciplinary education in environment and sustainability; and
• develop people who have the skills to create, define and succeed in the future careers and industries of sustainable societies.

The University actively engages with all sectors to drive progress towards a sustainable future. The University will:
• be a leading voice in raising public awareness and advancing and influencing policy discussion and debate;
• work strategically with partners to create innovative solutions to sustainability challenges; and
• engage in ongoing dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders on its environmental impact and performance.

Sustainable practices are embedded in all of the University’s operations, modelling innovative ways to maximise social and environmental value. The University will:
• develop and maintain its campuses as living laboratories of sustainable communities;
• lead technological, financial and social innovation through applied sustainability projects;
• instil sustainability principles in procurement decisions, across product life cycles and supply chains; and
• strategically focus investment priorities on sectors and organisations that lead in the delivery of a low carbon and ethically sound future, while ensuring the University’s long-term financial position.

The University integrates sustainability principles into its decision-making and the management of the organisation. The University will:
• build and maintain the planning, decision-making and governance framework required to enact the commitments of this Charter; and
• be consultative, open and accountable in reporting progress towards delivering these commitments.
As a distinguished research and teaching institution, The University of Melbourne has a responsibility to lead public debate and action towards a sustainable future. Through knowledge, imagination and action the University will help shape a sustainable planet. The University will be an international exemplar of a fully sustainable community in all of its activities.

The Earth is a finite environment whose physical systems are tightly interconnected with all life on the planet. For thousands of years, Indigenous peoples lived on the earth without altering the global balance of the environment. Humanity is now suddenly in the historic position of changing the balance of both the physical and biological environments, with unintended consequences. Accordingly, the University recognises that rights for Indigenous peoples and respect for Indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to equitable development and sustainable management of the land.

The University’s commitments are based on six fundamental principles:

- **Leadership**, through example, globally, nationally and locally;
- **Interdisciplinary research**, integrating knowledge from wide-ranging disciplines;
- **Active global citizenship**, for all students and staff;
- **Equity**, in the use of global resources;
- **Social inclusion and diversity in communities and the environment**;
- **Transparency and accountability**, in all institutional decision-making and activity; and
- **Action**, urgent if necessary

This Charter frames sustainability values and principles to be embedded throughout the University’s operations. In delivering the objectives embodied in the Charter, we will fulfill the aspiration of the University’s motto: *postera crescam laude* – we shall grow in the esteem of future generations.

**COMMITMENTS**

Research underpins the University’s contribution to creating positive social change. The University will:

- conduct research that contributes significantly to knowledge and action across the interdisciplinary dimensions of sustainability;
- support researchers across different fields to work collectively on environmental problems; and
- use sustainability principles to guide decisions about research funding, conduct and communication.

Graduates of the University are active, informed citizens who contribute to change for sustainability. The University will:

- offer an experience and an education that enables graduates from all disciplines to develop knowledge, values and skills to be societal leaders;
- provide specialist and general interdisciplinary education in environment and sustainability; and
- develop people who have the skills to create, define and succeed in the future careers and industries of sustainable and socially inclusive communities.

The University actively engages with all sectors to drive progress towards a sustainable future for all life on earth. The University will:

- be a leading voice in raising public awareness, advancing and influencing policy discussion and debate;
- work strategically with partners to promote the University’s values and principles and create innovative solutions to sustainability challenges; and
- engage in ongoing dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders on its environmental impact and performance.

Sustainable practices are embedded in all of the University’s operations, modelling innovative ways to maximise social and environmental value. The University will:

- develop and maintain its campuses as living laboratories of sustainable communities;
- lead technological, financial and social change through applied sustainability projects;
- instil sustainability principles in procurement decisions, across product life cycles and supply chains; and
- strategically focus investment priorities on sectors and organisations that lead in the delivery of a low carbon and ethically sound future, in order to ensure the University’s long-term financial position.

The University integrates sustainability principles into its decision-making and the management of the organisation. The University will:

- build and maintain the planning, decision-making and governance framework required to enact the commitments of this Charter;
- provide its students and staff with opportunities to participate in decision-making and advisory boards; and
- be consultative, open and accountable in reporting progress towards delivering the commitments outlined in this Charter.

**Leadership and engagement**

**Accountability**

**Divestment**

**Social Inclusion and Inequality**

**General**
Appendix: Sustainability Governance

Heads of budget divisions are responsible for ensuring all staff, students and stakeholders are engaged, encouraged and supported in achieving a sustainable campus. Environmental Policy 1.5.

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Appendix: Sustainability Consultation Charter Meeting Summary

Sustainability Charter Consultation Meeting and Q and A – Summary

Chair: Jill Bunnell, Arts and Sustainability Liaison, GSA

Lead Presenter: Jim Smith, GSA President, Student Representative on the Sustainability Executive

In attendance from GSA:

Beornn McCarthy, Higher Education Manager
Thomas Whiteside, General Secretary
Jordan Rozanski, Coursework Officer
Adele Hirst, Activities Officer
Jessica Balanzategui, Research Assistant

Jim Smith’s Introduction: What the GSA is doing in response to the University’s Draft Sustainability Charter

GSA has successfully lobbied the University to create a student representative on the Sustainability Executive. Jim Smith, GSA President, was appointed to the Sustainability Executive. The GSA Council met to discuss sustainability in October, and has:

- Developed a list of aspirations to inform our response to the Sustainability Charter and implementation plan.
- Committed GSA to reviewing its ethical and sustainable procurement. By March next year, GSA will establish new guidelines for contracting suppliers, adhering to agreed-upon sustainability targets.

In mid-December, the GSA will be submitting our response to the draft Charter. We need feedback from graduate students via:

- Email gsa@gsa.Unimelb.edu.au
- Submission of questions/feedback using our feedback form.

GSA has endorsed the following aspirations to inform our initial response to the Charter:

- That the University should act as a sustainability leader, and the University community should become a role model and living laboratory for sustainability.
- That reasonable and evidence-based actions to address climate change should be taken now, including targeted divestment from organisations that profit from carbon-intensive supply chains.
- That the disclosure of information about sustainability and investment in the University be mandated so that all members of the University community can participate in solving problems.
- That all graduate students are included and are able to participate and be represented in the decision-making that solves the challenges of sustainability.

Formal Questions:

Topic One: Divestment

- The majority of feedback the University has received regards divestment.
- David Vuong from Melbourne University Law Students’ Society disseminated the following question around the Law School: What will happen to investments in fossil fuels? Will there be divestment?
Jim Smith and Thomas Whiteside pointed to the final line in paragraph four, which gestures to this issue via reference to the University’s commitment to “strategically focus investment priorities on sectors and organisations that lead in the delivery of a low carbon and ethically sound future, while ensuring the University’s long-term financial position.” Thomas noted that the GSA is pro-divestment, and that through representation GSA wants to achieve a more solid commitment to transparent financial reporting.

Jim Smith discussed the importance of student representation, to ensure student representatives were being placed where decisions relating to finances and investment are actually being made. He noted that most of these decisions occur on the Finance Committee, which currently has no student representation, although the GSA have been working towards attaining this. He then explained that the Victorian Government has recently re-introduced legislation which mandates that University council’s must have student representation, however this does not extend to finance and investment committees. He suggested that student representatives on committees of Council need to be making the case for representation on the Finance Committee.

The discussion then moved to the general nature of the Charter. Concerns were raised about the University’s specific intentions, as a commitment to divestment is not overtly or precisely presented in the Charter. Jill Bunnell pointed out that it will be the Sustainability Plan that will emerge from the Charter that will establish specific goals and processes. However concerns remained that the Charter was still too general and vague to suggest a genuine commitment to divestment. It was agreed that a more decisive commitment to divestment should be expressed in the Charter.

Jim Smith, Jill Bunnell and Beornn McCarthy then discussed the sustainability initiatives occurring at Australian National University, which set up a socially responsible investment policy in response to a sustainability charter released by the National Student Union in 2001. Beornn outlined how ANU enacted an independent review of their investment practices based on their socially responsible investment policy, and suggested that an independent review at Melbourne based on the charter could help to solidify the University’s commitment to divestment. He noted that in particular, an independent voice was needed on the Finance Committee to ensure that commitments to divestment and sustainability generally were not being displaced by the other interests with strong voices on the Committee.

The discussion then moved to broader issues surrounding how investment and financial strategy are presented in the Charter. Fossil Free Melbourne University suggested that a small word change in the final sentence of the fourth paragraph - from “while ensuring the University’s long-term financial position”, to “in order to ensure the University’s long-term financial position” - could positively adjust the University’s approach. The University’s definition and perception of “long-term” was also discussed, because this term could have variable implications in relation to climate change and sustainability.

Greens on Campus asked if a more precise commitment to divestment and divestment processes could be included in the Charter. Jim Smith responded that while only one meeting of the Sustainability Executive has been held to date, he received the impression that it would be embarrassing for the University to state commitments in the Charter that are not subsequently enacted, and for this reason he understands that there is a need for the Charter to be somewhat fluid and general at this stage. He concluded that he is hopeful that the subsequent Sustainability Plan will be more precise and direct.

**Topic Two: Social inclusion**

- Michelle Wilson from Postgraduate Environmental Network: *There seems to be a lack of reference to Indigenous peoples and how the Charter is expected to interact with the Indigenous policy that the University is developing. Should the role and place of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders be included in the Charter? What about social inclusion and inequality?*
Jim Smith and Jill Bunnell confirmed that the GSA finds the omission of issues surrounding social inclusion and inequality in the Charter very problematic. Jill Bunnell spoke about the need for Indigenous perspectives in the Charter and subsequent plan. She noted that the input of the custodial owners of the land would be vital to an effective and inclusive sustainability plan. Jill then expressed her concerns about the recent funding cuts to Murrup Barak, the University’s Indigenous group. She outlined how Murrup Barak has undergone a major restructure as a result of the University’s Business Improvement Plan, which resulted in the loss of at least five staff members. Jill stated that the restructure of Murrup Barak has set the University back in matters of social inclusion, and highlights a problematic disconnect between the stated aims of the University and their genuine commitments.

Oak Tree, an organisation that focuses on poverty, then voiced their support for the Charter, however they expressed their concern that the Charter does not include mention of how the University will help to alleviate the effects of climate change on developing nations. They asked if any conversations about this issue had occurred, and stated their position that resource rich companies should have a clear stance on climate change in developing countries. Jim Smith noted that this hadn’t yet been discussed, while Jill Bunnell affirmed that it was an important issue that the University should address if they want to establish themselves as an international sustainability leader. Greens on Campus agreed that if the phrase “sustainable planet” is going to be used throughout the Charter, the University should clearly express a commitment to helping to alleviate climate change in developing nations.

The Postgraduate Environment Network then suggested that the University look into Indigenous carbon credits, which have a range of co-benefits that far exceed the direct benefits. Looking forward to the plan, they suggested that the University should consider integrating elements of the Reconciliation Action Plan, and purchasing Indigenous carbon credits.

**Topic Three: Biodiversity**

- Question: *What about biodiversity? Does the campus, as a sustainable laboratory, address this?*

While many agreed that biodiversity should be referenced directly in the Charter’s commitments, a member of the Postgraduate Environment Network with expertise in this area suggested that biodiversity was much too complicated an issue to raise in a brief and general manner in the Charter. He mentioned that the University is currently developing a Biodiversity Management Plan, and is collaborating with the City of Melbourne’s Resilience Officer. He suggested that any inclusion of biodiversity in the Charter would necessarily be too vague and general to have any real effect. He then suggested that because the University will soon release its Biodiversity Plan in collaboration with the City of Melbourne, a reference to biodiversity in the Charter is not needed.

Others in attendance suggested that biodiversity should still be included in the Charter to ensure that the issue was on the University’s sustainability agenda. Fossil Free Melbourne University suggested that a clause that gestured to biodiversity and social inclusion would ensure that the University addressed these issues. A member of One Health then suggested that One Health could help the GSA with its approach to the issue of social inclusion. PEN suggested that resilience and adaptability may also need to be included in the charter.

**Topic Four: Animal Agriculture**

- Question from Kate T (student): *Given that animal agriculture is the main contributor to global warming I’m curious as to whether the Charter will address this?*

Jim Smith noted that the Charter does not address this issue directly, but does reference a number of surrounding issues. A member of the Postgraduate Environment Network explained that the
University is doing a lot of work in this area, and suggested that perhaps the University could provide incentives for private businesses on campus to engage in procurement analysis.

Jim Smith explained that the GSA has found in their research that a number of U.K. universities have mandated catering initiatives such as Meat-free Mondays. He concluded that the issue of animal agriculture is about procurement as well as investment.

**The meeting was then opened to casual discussion, with those in attendance invited to raise topics of interest to them.**

**Fair Trade**

A representative from the Law Student’s Society raised the issue of fair trade. She noted that this was an important issue that the Charter could speak to, especially considering that Melbourne is a fair trade university. As an example, she referred to the Co-op, which doesn’t follow fair trade principles, and asked how the University could address the issue of negotiation with affiliated private companies that are not fair trade. Beornn McCarthy suggested that procurement should be included in the Charter’s commitments.

**Green Infrastructure**

A member of the Postgraduate Environment Network raised the issue of green infrastructure, and expressed his concern that this wasn’t referenced explicitly in the Charter. He stated that if green infrastructure was included as a commitment in the Charter, new projects at the University would have to follow certain guidelines.

**Accountability**

Greens on Campus raised their concern that there was no mention of accountability processes in the Charter, and suggested that to ensure transparency the Charter should include details about how the University would report on their progress. It was suggested that in the final lines of the Charter, a commitment to transparent reporting processes should be included. Beornn McCarthy explained that the GSA can help to ensure that information about the implementation of the Sustainability Plan is disseminated effectively.

**Effective Consultation and Regular Meetings**

It was suggested that to ensure consultation relating to the Charter is effective and ongoing, that the GSA could host quarterly sustainability meetings. A member of Sustainable Campus also urged those in attendance to attend their events, and to contact them via their email address sustainable-campus@unimelb.edu.au to provide the group with feedback, to make suggestions about future events, and to ask any questions.

In relation to events, Jim Smith informed everyone that the GSA is sending a delegation from campus to the People’s Climate March this Friday the 24th of November. He then urged those in attendance to continue to send the GSA feedback, and to encourage others in their networks to send feedback and questions as well. He reminded everyone that the GSA is in the process of establishing its own procurement framework and sustainability targets, which will continue to be key issues for the GSA into the new year. Jill Bunnell concluded the meeting thanking everyone for their attendance and engagement, and reminded everyone to regularly check the GSA website to be informed of GSA’s events and initiatives, in particular a sustainability prize that will launched in the future.

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