



**Sustainability**  
**Week** Switzerland

*University Policy*

*Concept*

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## Introduction

### The “What” and Why of university policy

This concept is supposed to give insights into the relevance of university policy (UP) for fostering sustainable development in our society. It is also meant to stimulate actions and engagement at higher education institutions (HEI) in the frame of university policy. It has the purpose to provide you with some guidelines for your work in the UP, as well as to outline some possible scenarios for the UP of your local sustainability week (LSW). We also pass on the experiences we made in Zurich. I would like to show you that, in my view, UP is important to achieve the sustainability transformation needed and to give HEI the necessary momentum to do this change in the limited time frame we have given.

But who am „I“ actually? My name is Lorenz Keysser and I have been involved in UP with the Zurich Sustainability Week and the [Student Sustainability Commission] of VSETH for three years now. Thus, I will have a little focus on Zurich and the HEI there, but I will try to make it as broadly applicable as possible. Also, it is important to mention that I can only refer to the experiences I have made. I am convinced that it is very important that you make your own experiences and try out what works for you and what does not. This concept is therefore designed to show you what we did in Zurich and to lay out some possible ways for you, which you may follow or not. =)

But what do I mean when I am talking about UP? I think that there are various definitions, but it principally is politics at the HEI. It concerns everything between students as a democratic entity and the HEI as institution. Students democratically formulate their interests and communicate them towards the HEI, which takes them into account. It also comprises work in committees and boards to influence decisions around the HEI. So, why should we actually get involved into UP if we are concerned with sustainability? I think there are several reasons.

First, when looking at the sustainability crisis we see that we simply run out of time. Thus, we really need every effort we can get, efficiently spent, right now. Here engagement in UP has some advantages compared with other possibilities regarding its potential impact. Since nearly every sector at a HEI is very much influenced by the course of the school's executive board the potential impact here can be huge. Furthermore, since we live in a democracy UP is the adequate way to formulate student positions and to bring them to the decision makers. If students make constructive pressure while showing solutions and possibilities to solve problems, the executive board can justify changes with this „grassroots movement“ and hereby gets the necessary democratic legitimation. Therefore, UP can be a way to achieve big changes in a relatively short amount of time. It combines a bottom up approach with a top down reaction. The premise is however that the pressure is large enough. Hence, and I will come back to this more often, it is crucial that you spent time with your student union, since they are the official democratic representation of students.

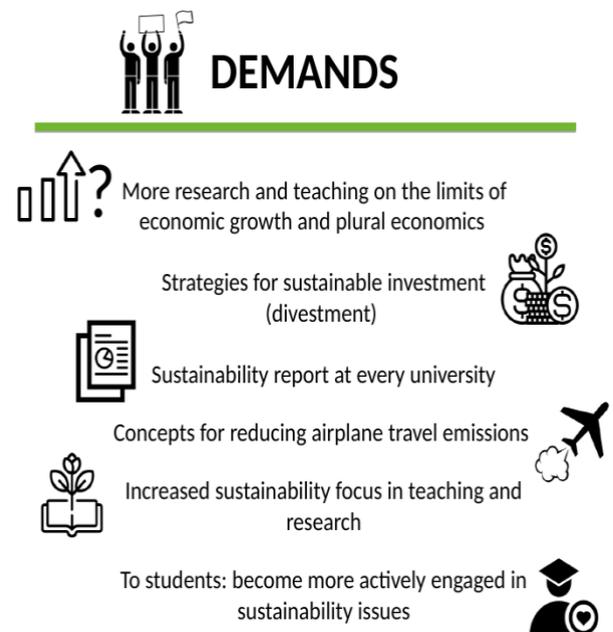
Secondly, HEI are role models and light houses for society. They are not only generating new technologies, insights, start ups etc., they also show society how the most educated people in the country are living. If change happens here it will influence other areas more easily since there is also trust into the institution of a HEI. If a HEI with all its cleverness can't become sustainable, how could society ever be? Therefore, we have to start living the transformation at the HEI right now to show that it is possible and to stir up the public.

To say it in a nutshell: UP is the appropriate and most acknowledged way in the democracy of HEI, it has a high potential impact to change the policies made at HEI and through them it can influence the society as a whole, since HEI are role models. I hope this gives a small overview what UP is and why it is so important the students who are aware of our sustainability crisis become engaged into UP. If you have any comments, improvements or constructive criticism, feel encouraged to write an email.

## Frame conditions in Switzerland

You will not be the first one who is doing something in the direction of UP with a focus on sustainability in Switzerland and this is a very good thing. You can get inspirations from them and work together. Here the SSW can help you a lot. So, use the Swiss wide contacts. Why not make a Swiss wide campaign at every HEI?

For actions like these the [VSS \(Swiss Student Union\)](#) and [VSN \(Swiss Union of Student Organizations for Sustainability\)](#) will help you a lot. They published the demand paper „[Sustainability at the Swiss Higher Education Institutions!](#)“ at the 2016 Sustainability Week in Zurich. It comprises some very important points to which you can refer when demanding more consistent climate action from your HEI. The demand paper is formulated very loosely, but this gives some room for interpretation which is sometimes useful. Additionally to this demand paper there was a [position paper](#) with much more detailed positions regarding sustainability. These papers are vitally important since they show that literally all students in Switzerland are demanding more sustainability from their HEI. We can use these positions not only to make more democratic pressure on the executive boards, but also to get inspirations on what we can work on. For example, the NHWZ took six demands which are mostly based on the demand paper and which are particularly relevant for the Zurich HEI. We will talk about them later.



## The Sustainability Week Zurich as a case study

In the following chapter I will discuss the case of the Sustainability Week Zurich (NHWZ) 2016, 2017 and 2018 for UP, what has been done, what was achieved and how the future development could look like.

### What has been done and what was achieved?

The specific resort of university policy within the NHWZ exists since 2016, but also before UP was conducted, but not in such a structured way. For example, the founder of the NHWZ, Annuscha Wassmann organized panel discussions with members of the HEIs executive boards, cared about good contacts to the Student Union and their sustainability commissions as well as lobbied successfully for the creation of a sustainability delegate position at the University of Zurich (UZH).

### NHWZ 2016

Then in 2016 the demand paper of VSS and VSN was published. Thus, we took the paper and searched for the demands which fit the best to the five big HEI in Zurich. We wrote little texts to formulate our understanding

of the demands more precisely and put abstracts of them on our flyers. The results can be seen at our [web page](#) and on the picture on the right. Further we wrote [letters](#) to the executive boards in which we presented the demands and offered a constructive dialogue about them and the solutions. Additionally, we created posters with the demands and presented them around the campus. We also presented our demands before every big evening event, so everybody knows about them. Further we organized an internal roundtable with delegates from the five universities, which we invited (most of the time we sent an email to the executive board or the secretary and asked for a delegate since we invited all the five universities) regarding the topic of the creation of a sustainability report at every HEI in Zurich. This was also one of our demands. Last but not least a UP panel discussion was organized regarding growth criticism and post growth economies.

What was achieved through all of this? In the end not as much as hoped. We noticed that our demands will only be heard by the executive boards if we send them through our local student unions, since only then we are the voice of all the students (one big lesson learned). Thus, we only received very limited feedback. Our roundtable was more successful, since ETHs experience with sustainability reporting could be spread. The panel discussion also had no immediate UP results, but could place the problem more in the heads of the people.

A very important side notion is, that the [project21], as the student sustainability commission at ETH, wrote letters to the executive board separately regarding the topics of divestment from fossil fuels and a concept for reducing air travel emissions. Both letters were heard, we got a meeting with the vice president for finance and sustainability criteria were discussed and applied partly. The other letter was one of the reasons ETH is now heavily focusing on reducing air travel emissions. In the end the combination of NHWZ actions and the ones of [project21] proved quite effective.

#### **NHWZ 2017**

In 2017 we tried to learn from our mistakes, which only worked partly. Our plan was to make an evaluation of the progress the HEI made in working on our demands. The results can be found [here on our webpage](#). For this purpose we wrote [letters to the executive boards](#) and asked them to provide information on their progress. We received feedback from all HEI, except that the ETHZ was not very amused about our letter. This was a strategic mistake since they were not discussing our demands but our language and tone. But maybe it was not as bad as described here, since they were discussing about us at least. Further we searched best-practice examples for every demand we made, which can also be found at [our web page](#). Besides the evaluation we focused a lot more on events and the roundtables. We organized three of the last mentioned regarding a sustainability report as in 2016, flight emission reductions and growth criticism and how to change the teaching at UZH in economics. Additionally, we organized a panel discussion with the title „Flying for research – a climate sin or a necessity?“ with members of the executive board of ETH and UZH. Moreover, we again hang up the

posters with the demands, but did not present them at the events again. Last but not least we laid a focus on networking and on bringing the student sustainability commissions at the five HEI back to life.

What were the outcomes of this year's UP? First, we conducted a full evaluation of our progress which was made public at our webpage. But sincerely, this was a very big effort for results which were not as high as planned. I have no evidence that this effort was providing any progress in sustainability at the HEI at all. The panel discussion and the roundtables proved otherwise. At the panel the UZH rector was brought to promise that a sustainability report will be conducted if a request by the sustainability delegate will be send – which of course happened.

All the roundtables were very useful. At the one for sustainability reporting we noticed that now only the ZHAW is missing in organizing a report. All other HEI will. The flight emission round is now meeting regularly at least twice a year and is really inspiring for the other HEI since ETH can tell about its progress. The roundtable for growth criticism was also very effective, since there a project team was built which applied at the U Change program with the project of a lecture of „plural economics“. This application was accepted and now this lecture is most likely going to take place in 2018.

**NHWZ 2018**

In 2017, due to the publication of Switzerland's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions, university politics in Zurich addressed the question of what a sustainable university should look like in 2030. To address this topic, the rectors of the PHZH, ZHdK and ZHAW, as well as one university board member each of the UZH and ETH, were invited to a joint panel discussion. The starting point for the discussion were video messages from students from all five universities in which they described their vision of a sustainable university. The topics discussed included the need for a sustainability report, the reduction of flight emissions caused by aviation and the inadequate integration of sustainability into the curriculum of the listed institutions.

In addition to the public panel discussion, two internal roundtables on the topics of "Reduction of flight emissions" and "Sustainability Report & Sustainability Office" were held. Employees from all universities who specifically dealt with this content took part. Both roundtables were initiated by the LSW team for university politics and lead to interesting discussions and networking.

In the course of last year, various meetings took place with representatives of various student associations. The cooperation between the Sustainability Week Zurich and the associations was discussed, as well as the general procedure for attracting new students to the topic of sustainability and motivating them to actively participate. This exchange continues to take place, whereby great importance is attached to the individual circumstances at the various universities. Two internal working groups on higher education policy were set up in 2017. One of them, in cooperation with the commission for sustainability of the student association of the University of Zurich, deals with the sustainability strategy of the University of Zurich and prepared a position paper which was sent to the persons responsible for the strategy. The second working group dealt with the question of which vision Zurich Sustainability Week should pursue as an organization. Both teams are still active

**ACHIEVEMENTS & OUTCOME**



Delegate position for Sustainability at University of Zurich

Sustainability report at the University of Zurich



U Change Project: Lecture Plural Economics



Regular roundtables about flight emissions and pressure on ETH



Networking



Demands



Panel discussions



Roundtables



Evaluation

and work independently on their topics in consultation with the department. (by Jenny Shepherd | University Politics Zurich 2018 | shepherd.j@hotmail.com)

### **NHWZ 2019**

In 2019 the course of 2018 will be continued. Now the coordinating person is Annika Brunner and you can contact her via [hochschulpolitik@nachhaltigkeitswoche.ch](mailto:hochschulpolitik@nachhaltigkeitswoche.ch).

### **How could the future look like?**

The future development of the UP will orientate itself on the realization of the demand paper of the VSS and VSN, as well as on the outcomes of the WG which covers the future goals and focuses of UP. What will be clear however is that the NHWZ will seek a well-established contact with the local student unions and their sustainability commissions, since only then we can speak with the voice of all students and will be heard by the executive boards. This really was a key learning from the 2016 and 2017 Sustainability Weeks.

Another important aspect for the future is a possible membership of the NHWZ in the „Klima-Allianz Schweiz“ since this could add to our outreach and impact. However, this membership is currently discussed, and now final decision was taken on this issue.

Another aspect is of course the SSW. The SSW could give the student sustainability movement on Switzerland a fully different drive and we could aim higher, e.g. at the governmental or swissuniversities-level. If we all work together this could be in our reach. Exciting outlooks, right?

## **Two scenarios for your Higher Education Institution (HEI)**

In these chapter two possible scenarios for your UP are outlined. I would like to emphasize that these are only ideas and based on the experiences we have made. You can still make it differently as you wish. However, the SSW has some simple guidelines which should be followed when you pursue your work with UP.

### **Guidelines for the university policy of the local sustainability weeks**

First of all, the feature all UPs of the LSW should have in common is that their work should be based on the demand and position papers of the VSS and VSN. This ensures that all LSW share a common ground and that this ground is more or less democratically legitimated. Of course, not all student unions in Switzerland are part of the VSS, but it is the biggest student union in Switzerland and thus the paper is legitimized as much as possible.

Secondly you should seek the contact with your local student union to try to make pressure this way and to influence student's general opinion on this topic.

Thirdly you should always be polite and constructive in all writings going to student unions or executive boards etc. It is really important that the content is discussed not the language. If there is a local student sustainability group or commission, you can work together with them and use their knowledge of the situation.

Also, for all work related to the canteens I would like to refer to the canteen concept written by Giulia Fontana and Rosa Brown.

### **Smaller University Policy**

A scenario for a smaller UP could include the following points:

- Search if there is a local student sustainability commission and contact them for a meeting with regard to UP. Search for other alliances with student groups – collaboration is key!

- Take a look (together or not) at the demand paper of VSS and VSN. Brainstorm which demands would include the points which have the highest potential at your HEI, be it international air travel, heating or sustainability in teaching.
- Write down these central demands and discuss how you can pursue them. You can write a letter to your student unions and ask them what they think about the paper or whether you can present it to them. Personal meetings or skype calls are to be preferred. At the meeting or in the mail you can ask them whether they would support a letter to the executive board informing about the demands (if they were accepted by the student union) and asking for a dialogue about them and possible solutions.
- Write the demands on posters, program flyers, web page, Facebook page etc.

### **Bigger University Policy**

A scenario for a bigger UP could include all the above-mentioned points and could add the following:

- If there is a student sustainability commission within your student union, you can work much more through the student unions. You can also ask the executive boards responsible people for a meeting to discuss the demands.
- If there is a sustainability report already you can look at it and criticize it constructively.
- If you have more people in the team you can split up and make working groups for different demands, events, strategies etc.
- Additionally, to this „background“ work you can also organize events regarding UP: be it a panel discussion with rectors or a round table with delegates of the university regarding the different demands. These two formats proved very useful in Zurich. The invitations should also be sent over the student unions. But it also worked once with a direct invitation.

You can also orientate yourself further on the things we did in Zurich mentioned above. In the end there is no cookbook recipe for UP.

## **Tips and general notes**

Here I will just give some general tips and remarks which I think are useful for UP.

- UP can be very exhausting, since successes not always come instantly, but most of the time one has to wait and be persistent till change happens. This is maybe one of the most important points about UP: be persistent and do not stop to bother the executive board with the importance of and their commitment to sustainability.
- UP is a lot about contacts and knowing what's going on. Find people in your HEI, say the sustainability delegate or the [person responsible for U Change](#) who can give you advice and whom you can approach if you are unsure with an action. Also search for other student initiatives which can help you and build alliances with them (student unions!).
- A letter can do a lot if people are forced to think about an issue through reading it. So, if you are writing a letter to the executive board, e.g. regarding your demands, undermine it with the huge consensus about sustainability, at least on the official level (VSS & VSN papers, SDGs, Paris agreement, Swiss constitution etc.). You can also search for commitments by the HEI itself to sustainability to build up pressure.
- Use media attention wisely. Put your demands on your program, webpacer, facebook page etc. The more people know about them the better. You can also try to write local newspapers to get an interview about your demands and the progress.

- Use the competition factor. If you have more than one HEI in your city you can compare them and „play them out against one another“. This can be a quite effective way to get all HEI in your city to the same level quite fast.
- It is also very important that the LSW acts sustainably itself. We need to be role models to realize the change we want the HEI to pursue. Otherwise it is not very convincing what we are demanding from them – That why we have the „Code of Conduct“.
- If you have any questions regarding UP or regarding some documents you can always contact me or [hochschulpolitik@nachhaltigkeitswoche.ch](mailto:hochschulpolitik@nachhaltigkeitswoche.ch). We are happy to help out.

## Conclusion

I hope to have shown you that UP can be a very exciting and effective way to change how HEI do their work. Moreover, if we all work together we can reference one another and provide best-practices. We can reach higher levels of impact with the national student unions, swissuniversities and the government. But it is important to keep in mind that every beginning is hard and exhausting. It takes a lot of time to achieve progress. I know, time is our scarcest resource when it comes to sustainability problems, climate change at the forefront. Nevertheless, I am convinced that we need to work on every side we can and UP is not a bad option to pursue, as I have shown above. So let's get together, work hard, make HEI more sustainable and „be the change we want to see in the world“.