



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

SUSTAINABILITY LABELLING OF COURSES AND STUDY PROGRAMMES

The Environmental Unit
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1. Background

1.1 Why sustainability labelling?

Since 2006, the University of Gothenburg has been using a special system for labelling those courses and study programmes that are related to sustainable development issues. One purpose of this labelling is to follow up the university-wide goal contained in the Action Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development 2011-2015 to increase the integration of sustainable development in education. The proportion of labelled courses and study programmes is reported annually in the University's sustainability report. Another purpose of the labelling is to specifically visualise for students courses and study programmes at the various faculties and departments that deal with sustainability issues. Since its introduction this labelling has been a concrete way of trying to respond to the 2006 supplement to the Higher Education Act, which particularly emphasises the role of higher education institutions in sustainable development:

“In the course of their operations, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice.”

The Swedish Higher Education Act 2006, Chapter 1, Section 5

1.2 How the student comes in contact with the labelling

The labelling is communicated through the printed course catalogue and via the University's websites. The printed course catalogue indicates which of the University courses and study programmes are sustainability labelled, with a short text explaining the implications. Students can find a range of courses and study programmes on the University's website (www.gu.se) via this path: *Education, Course and Programme search, Filter, Other, Sustainability*. No other thematic focus has been set out as clearly as this in the web structure.

1.3 From eco-labelling to sustainability labelling

A green clover symbol was used up until the 2010 course catalogue to denote the extent to which courses and study programmes dealt with sustainable development. The label was called *eco-labelling*, although even then the aim was to reflect the issue of sustainable development, not just the environment.

The following symbols have been used since the 2011 course catalogue, with the name of the labelling changed to *sustainability labelling*. The background to this was feedback suggesting that the previous graphic symbols signified the environment in a way that was too one-sided. Calling the labelling *eco-labelling* was considered to be misleading when the purpose was in fact broader¹. The criteria for

¹ “Kursmärkning - Utvärdering av märkning av kurser och program vid Göteborgs universitet efter inslag av miljö och hållbar utveckling”, Ellen Lagrell, 2008

labelling remained the same and the criteria are briefly as follows:



Courses or study programmes mainly dealing with sustainable development, where more than half of the course or programme has elements related to ecological, economic or social sustainability.



Course or study programme partly dealing with sustainable development, and where less than half of the course or programme has elements related to ecological, economic or socially sustainable development.

Further instructions are available [here](#):

1.4 Why update the criteria for sustainability labelling?

Since the introduction of labelling, a number of small-scale studies have been conducted into how the labelling is perceived. The most recent survey, involving the School of Business, Economics and Law, was conducted in 2012 by Jenny Haglind, a human geography student, on behalf of the Environmental Unit². During the survey it transpired from interviews with course coordinators that clearer criteria were required. Other faculties and institutions have also requested clarification of labelling in different contexts, e.g. in connection with internal environmental audits and annual reports within environmental management.

1.5 The purpose of the revised criteria

The purpose of revising the current criteria for labelling is to clarify the meaning of the labels. This means that the instance at the University that makes decisions on labelling should receive better guidance and students should be able to use the label as a guide and guarantee that the courses or study programmes do include a clear view of sustainability.

The goal is to achieve clear, credible and transparent sustainability labelling with roots in the curriculum and learning outcomes or, in the case of study programmes, the programme curriculum.

1.6 Work process for drafting a proposal for new criteria for sustainability labelling

The Environmental Unit has been commissioned through the Action Plan for Environment and Sustainable Development 2011-2015 to: "Update the guidelines for sustainability labelling to link the labelling of courses to the learning outcomes for courses". This report, proposing revised criteria, represents a brief final account of this work. Barbro Robertsson, a former teacher and researcher at the Sahlgrenska Academy, has led this process at the Environmental Unit. Prior to this work, the use of the concept of sustainability has been studied nationally and internationally, with particular regard to the criteria and methodology for the sustainability labelling of courses and study programmes. Meetings, discussions and workshops have been held with different groups of teachers and researchers at the University of Gothenburg. The issues have also been discussed nationally – with other universities and in networks and organisations such as the MLUH (*Miljöledning vid Universitet och Högskolor* – Environmental management in universities and colleges) network and HU2 (Sustainable development in

² Hållbarhetsmärkning av kurser på Handelshögskolan vid Göteborgs universitet, en kvalitativ intervjuundersökning made by Jenny Haglind on behalf of the Environmental Unit, University of Gothenburg in the course ES1600 Environmental Science into practice.

higher education) – and internationally within ISCN (International Sustainable Campus Network) and NSCN (Nordic Sustainable Campus Network).

2. Responsibility for the establishment of criteria and decisions on sustainability labelling

2.1 Responsibility for the establishment of criteria

The Environmental Unit has been commissioned to draw up proposals for new criteria for the sustainability labelling of courses and study programmes, which are then adopted by the Education Committee.

The Environmental Unit monitors the results of the labelling annually, together with how the labelling process has functioned, and reports this to the Education Committee, which decides whether the criteria need to be revised.

2.2 Decisions on sustainability labelling

Decisions on the sustainability of courses and study programmes are made at the same organisational level as decisions on curriculum and study programmes in accordance with the University's Rules of Procedure and Vice-chancellor's Delegation of Authority Policy. A special box needs to be ticked when reporting to GUBAS (the education database at the University of Gothenburg) in order to technically label a course in this respect.

3. The concept of sustainability – starting points for sustainability criteria

The concept of sustainable development is used in different ways in different contexts. The present sustainability criteria are based on the following:

The concept of sustainable development is referred to in Chapter 1, Section 5 of the Higher Education Act:

“In the course of their operations, higher education institutions shall promote sustainable development to assure for present and future generations a sound and healthy environment, economic and social welfare, and justice.”

Chapter 1, Section 5 of the Swedish Higher Education Act 2006

This, in its turn, is based on international work conducted by the UN, formulated in the Brundtland Commission report entitled ‘Our Common Future’, 1987:

“Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities.”

The report of the 2012 UN World Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20: Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing, from the UN's 'High-level Panel on Global Sustainability':

“A quarter of a century ago, the Brundtland report introduced the concept of sustainable development to the international community as a new paradigm for economic growth, social equality and environmental sustainability.”

and also:

“The long-term vision of the Panel is to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and make growth inclusive, and production and consumption more sustainable, while combating climate change and respecting a range of other planetary boundaries.”

The report also emphasises that:

“Importantly, sustainable development is not a synonym for ‘environmental protection’. Instead, sustainable development is fundamentally about recognizing, understanding and acting on interconnections — above all those between the economy, society and the natural environment. Sustainable development is about seeing the whole picture —”

Sustainable development is a human-centred concept, focussing on human development and well-being for both current and future generations. It may be worth emphasising, as has been done internationally, that sustainability labelling makes a distinction between EE (Environmental Education) and ESD (Education for Sustainable Development)³. This means that pure environmental courses/study programmes cannot be labelled unless they deal with the complexity of the economy, society/human, nature/environment in a global perspective. Nor can the courses/study programmes be sustainability labelled if social issues are discussed without relating to natural resources.

There are opportunities to add a sustainability perspective to one's own discipline, regardless of whether the starting point is natural science, art, social science, human science, education, health science or economic/legal science.

³ See e.g. UNESCO: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-sustainable-development/education-for-sustainable-development/esd-and-other-types-of-educations/> or Arjen E. J. Wals, Geke Kieft: Education for Sustainable Development: Research Overview. [Sida Review 2010:13](#).

4. Criteria for sustainability labelling

The following criteria have been developed to clarify the requirements for sustainability labelling. The original version of these criteria was developed by the University of Oregon, but has also been used by the University of California, Irvine (UCI) and Weber State University⁴. Although the list includes multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary issues and perspectives, several of the criteria below fit into traditional academic disciplines. The criteria do not constitute a direct translation from the American model set, but have been further developed and adapted to current conditions through discussions during the work process, as described above.

The sustainability labelling is based on a list of ten criteria to be used when a course coordinator/ programme coordinator is working to integrate sustainable development into courses and study programmes. There is also the opportunity to develop more detailed criteria at a faculty or programme level, including concepts and terminology tailored for specific scientific fields. However, those should be substantively based on the following criteria. Unlike the previous model for labelling, the syllabus/curriculum learning objectives now need to clearly indicate how the criteria are met.

Like all other elements of the University's courses and study programmes, it may be important to emphasise that the elements of sustainable development should have a scientific basis. A critical approach and the capacity for critical analysis are key skills that should be encouraged and are highly relevant to sustainable development issues, where it is rare to find clear-cut answers and solutions.

As before, sustainability labelling is divided into two levels: 'sustainability focused' and 'sustainability related'. This follows international practice where 'sustainability-focused courses' and 'sustainability-related courses' are terms used; see AASHE Stars⁵.

4.1 Sustainability label for courses

Sustainability focused



Courses that are sustainability-focused, where at least one of the learning outcomes clearly shows that the course content meets one of the current sustainability criteria. In accordance with the criteria, the content with a focus on sustainability must also constitute the main focus of the course.

Sustainability related



Courses that are sustainability-related, where at least one of the learning outcomes clearly shows that the course content meets one of the current sustainability criteria.

⁴ University of Oregon: <https://stars.aashe.org/institutions/university-of-oregon-or/report/2011-02-25/ER/curriculum/ER-5/> University of California, Irvine: <https://stars.aashe.org/institutions/university-of-california-irvine-ca/report/744/ER/curriculum/ER-5/> Weber State University: http://www.weber.edu/environment/Sustainability_Defined.html

⁵ The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education: <http://www.aashe.org/>

4.2 Sustainability label for study programmes

Sustainability focused



Study programmes that are sustainability-focused, where at least one of the learning outcomes clearly shows that the study programme content⁶ meets one of the current sustainability criteria. In accordance with the criteria, the content with a focus on sustainability must also constitute the main focus of the study programme.

Sustainability related



Study programmes that are sustainability-related, where at least one of the learning outcomes clearly shows that the study programme content meets one of the current sustainability criteria.

⁶ The learning outcomes referred to here are the local general or professional qualifications formulated in addition to the general qualifications and where appropriate professional qualifications given by Higher Education Ordinance (1993: 100) <https://www.uhr.se/start/laws-and-regulations/Laws-and-regulations/The-Higher-Education-Ordinance/Annex-2/>

Criteria

The following criteria should be considered according to the objectives and content of each field of education.

1. Sustainability as a concept:

The history in a global context of the concept of sustainability and sustainable development and the current study field related to global challenges.

2. Analysis from a globalisation perspective

How products, services, or activities in their own lives or in the future professional profession affect the natural environment, social conditions and the economy in a global perspective, both today and in the future.

3. Natural limits

Demographic trends and lifestyle in relation to the exploitation of natural resources, or the finite capacity of natural ecosystems to provide for human needs.

4. Maintaining ecosystems

Conservation of natural resources and practices to protect and maintain the integrity of viable ecosystems in the face of rising human demands.

5. Human rights and social equity

Distribution, discrimination, health and poverty issues and the mutual interaction between social inequality, poor health, the natural environment and people's opportunities for good living conditions.

6. Values, culture and ethics

How norms, culture, religion, ethics and social conditions can shape human behaviour toward the natural world.

7. Consumer and customer power

How demands for environmental consideration and social responsibility from private and public clients and consumers affects individuals, policies and corporate strategies and business opportunities.

8. Governance and management

How regulations, policies, economic policy instruments and voluntary agreements, and leadership shape human behaviour and the actions of nations and companies in respect of the natural world and social issues.

9. Planning and design

How community planning and product and service design can influence human well-being and human impact on the natural environment.

10. Actors' work and responsibility

The efforts of various global and local actors, and their monitoring of environmental performance and social and economic responsibility.