



*Photo: Clive Bryson*

## **The Sustainability Dance**

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I believe, as I am sure many of you do as well, that achieving sustainability for humanity is going to require various mechanisms for getting the sustainability message out to as many people as possible and mobilising them to take appropriate action to promote sustainability. But how are we going to do it, effectively and sustainably?

Getting the sustainability message out to as many people as possible will no doubt depend on the messenger, the nature of the message, and the communication strategy, and not on any one of these factors acting on its own. It will probably always be true that researchers, their academic institutions and their various collectives, will have greater credibility and impact than other sources. In order to mobilise action, the messages will need to be captivating, compelling and memorable, and this will probably necessitate that the messages are expressed simply, concisely, clearly and logically. Patterns of communication within the general community suggest that communication strategies will have to include relatively traditional media such as TV, along with ‘new age’ social media using the Internet, such as Facebook, Twitter and the like.

Of course, there will almost certainly always be those who deny and criticize both these messages and their messengers, and this issue should be confronted head on. Research, including that underpinning sustainability, has always benefitted humanity, a point that needs to be made forcefully and frequently. Those who criticize sustainability research and its practitioners generally have non-research agendas they are promoting and offer no credible alternatives to current wisdom and business as usual. Ideally, they should be forced to ‘put up, or shut up’, but achieving something along these lines will take effort and time. Researchers need to support science in general, and sustainability science in general, and to defend these against unwarranted and unjustified attack.

The process of getting the sustainability message out there from authoritative sources will itself need to be sustainable for it to continue. Academic institutions and research collectives will only be able to “peddle” the sustainability message if this fuels their bottom

line, which may be as basic as continued financial viability. Only if attempts to communicate sustainability messages support their positions in academia, will researchers and other academics continue to do this. Academics are people, with their own needs and wants; institutions and collectives have similar goals.

Academic institutions will push and sell sustainability messages so long as this translates into continued, and ideally improved, support from Government and other sources of funding, and increased student interest and enrolment, with its consequent financial benefits. The bottom line for institutions can be expressed in terms of dollars.

This bottom line for academic institutions depends on research productivity and excellence, and on the levels of student demand. These days, assessments of Universities and the like depend on research productivity, as has always been assessed by measures such as numbers of academic publications and levels of financial support obtained competitively, and is now increasingly evaluated through measures of research excellence such as numbers of citations and peer review. At the same time student evaluation of Universities increasingly depends in turn on such assessments of Universities as, for example, in various worldwide rankings that have arisen. In short, research productivity and excellence drives University assessments and rankings, which drives support and student enrollments.

The bottom line for academics similarly depends on research productivity and excellence, with lip service to other broader goals. The mantra for researchers has always been ‘publish or perish’; now getting lots of citations is also important. Universities and the like generally include contribution by their academics to ‘The University’ or ‘The general community’ as stated desirable activities, but these things are obviously difficult to assess and, when ‘push comes to shove’, generally receive scant consideration. There would seem to be little, if any, incentive for academics to pursue anything other than the standard and time-honoured measures of academic performance.

Promoting sustainability for humanity is therefore something that our present academic world does not really encourage. Such promotion of sustainability does not, unfortunately, equate to research productivity and excellence. In fact, time spent promoting such sustainability may be time taken away from further production of well-cited research publications. Why then should an academic, especially one at a relatively early career stage, spend time promoting sustainability? The general answer is ... they shouldn’t (unless they are truly exceptional, and can meet the usual academic standards as well).

The resolution of all of these issues will require what I call the “Sustainability Dance”, whereby we all work together to pursue and promote sustainability. Government will only take action if ‘mandated’ by the electorate. Companies will only take action if required by consensus amongst shareholders. Universities will only develop courses re sustainability if demanded by students. How well people are informed about sustainability issues will depend on the various media by which we all communicate, and how we use these media. And so on! Only if we all dance together, academics, members of the community, politicians, the media, and others, can we achieve such things. This would be the “Sustainability Dance”.

I therefore urge you all to join with me in the “Sustainability Dance”. As an academic, I can and will promote getting the sustainability message out to the intelligent, but under-informed and mis-informed, general community. I shall be doing this in partnership with Paul Ehrlich and others. As members of the general community, you have control over who you vote for and, if shareholders, what your investment companies do. You may also be able to demand changes in educational and other institutions, and endeavour to obtain information from authoritative sources. If you are students, or potential students, you can choose amongst competing Universities and courses. And all can work through organizations, like ours (i.e., Sustainability Central; Millennium Alliance for Humanity & the Biosphere), to help bring society to the realization that sustainability must be not just its top priority, but its preoccupation. For sustainability to be achieved, all these things will be required, and they will need to be simultaneous and integrated. Surely, this is possible.

Our future is in our hands, but we shall have to dance together.

*MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to [joan@mahbonline.org](mailto:joan@mahbonline.org)*

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