

In January 2015, Freie Universität Berlin entered a partnership with four international universities. As part of the 5 year program [University Alliance for Sustainability](#), Freie Universität Berlin is collaborating with four strategic partners: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (Israel), the University of British Columbia (Vancouver, Canada), St. Petersburg State University (Russia), and Peking University (China). In 2015, funding by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) enabled site visits at University of British Columbia (UBC) through a number of different tracks.

Having volunteered for SUSTAIN IT!, the initiative for sustainability and climate protection at Freie Universität Berlin, I applied for the Sustainability Volunteer Swap track. In July 2015, I spent four weeks in Vancouver to explore the UBC campus and meet with fellow sustainability volunteers and practitioners.

Vancouver is a one-of-a-kind sustainability microcosm. While Canada is rapidly losing its positive environmental image, the coastal city, nestled between the Strait of Georgia and the North Shore Mountains, is aiming to become the greenest city in the world by 2020. It's also the founding city of organizations like the David Suzuki Foundation and Greenpeace.

To say that sustainability is a thing in Vancouver would be an understatement; it's a mindset, which over the past decades has been deeply ingrained in the city's culture and lifestyle. This culture is reflected, for example, in Vancity, a cooperative credit union founded in 1946. From the start, Vancity embraced social sustainability. Later they added environmental well-being of its members and their communities to their vision and in the 1980s and 1990s established funds to invest in respective projects.

UBC is its own microcosm. Situated on traditional territory of the Musqueam First Nation, surrounded by ocean and the Pacific Spirit Park, and with a breathtaking view of the coastal mountains, you can't help but be awed and inspired. It's no surprise then that the ecological footprint concept was developed at UBC in the 1990s and received the Blue Planet Award for Sustainability at the Rio+20 UN conference in 2012.

UBC's involvement with sustainability officially began in 1990, when they signed an action plan for incorporating sustainability into higher education. In 1997, UBC was Canada's first university to adopt a sustainable development policy and they opened Canada's first Sustainability Office the following year. Since then, they have realized one game changing initiative after the other, including their collaboratively formed, campus-wide sustainability strategy or the Center for Interactive Sustainability Research.

It's not fair to compare Vancouver with Berlin or UBC with Freie Universität Berlin. If geography and history didn't convince you, maybe the numbers will. Overall, the two universities aren't that different in size with 47,000 (UBC) vs. 35,000 (Freie Universität Berlin) students. When you look at the student-staff ratio, however, the two universities are worlds apart. Per 100 students, UBC

has roughly 27 staff members and 20 full time lecturers. Meanwhile, 100 students at Freie Universität Berlin are managed by 9 staff members and *almost* 1 professor.

Of course universities in North America are funded differently, which gives them an advantage in terms of allocating resources and channeling student engagement. And while you'd expect to see less engagement in a culture where students have to pay tuition and are forced to earn an income next to studying full time, the opposite is actually true.

The student-driven sustainability engagement I've observed at UBC is remarkable. I think this can be attributed to a culture that is much more hands-on and business-minded overall, i.e. not scared of mixing academia with industry. UBC understands that it's primarily educating students to become responsible leaders who will shape the future of our world, rather than academics working within academia. Consequently, the whole university structure supports students in acquiring real life skills.

A case in point is the AMS Bike Co-op. The project started as a student initiative in the late 1990s, eventually received funding from the Alma Mater Society (hence AMS) and a permanent space on campus. It now employs several people full or part time, operates the Bike Kitchen, a non-profit, full service community bike shop, and runs a Purple and Yellow Bike fleet accessible to its volunteer members.

This is one project of many initiated by students that was supported by the university's inherent infrastructure, received strategic funding early on, and quickly became a permanent on-campus operation. In dedicated programs, such as SEEDS for undergraduates or Greenest City Scholar for graduates, students earn credits by collaborating on sustainability-related projects with industry partners.

Meanwhile, SUSTAIN IT! is struggling with natural turnover and recruiting student or staff volunteers, despite receiving numerous grants and prizes for our work. It's not due to the quality of our projects or even the availability of funding. It may, however, be due to the lack of a culture, structures, and incentives for students and staff to identify with their university and engage in volunteer projects.

During my visit at UBC, one meeting after the other confirmed this idea that structures are needed to channel the desire to belong to a community and the will to contribute. None of the employees ever mentioned volunteering for a sustainability project (apart from working overtime). New initiatives were supported by redistributing work hours of existing staff, lecturers received grants to develop and pilot the Sustainability Pathways project, and with every new successful venture, the Sustainability Office grew in size.

Meanwhile, students reported professional organizational structures that keep the Alma Mater Society or clubs like Common Energy running and are deeply ingrained in the student culture. Engaging in extra curricular activities is not just an exercise to gain points for one's CV, but also

an opportunity to join a community, make friends, and learn for life. And much of it is supported by the university, not least by providing a physical space to work together.

My take home message is that UBC enables sustainability from the top down, meeting existing bottom-up demands. It's not imposing, but rather reacting by expanding its sustainability infrastructure. Both students and employees are empowered to continuously develop a sustainable university within this growing framework.

If we can learn one thing from UBC, it's how students organize themselves and how initiatives are supported by the university with a basic infrastructure and competitive funding.