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Embedding Sustainability within Organizations

Sustainability at NYU Abu Dhabi Management Report | November 2019

Introduction

This management report has been prepared to assess the current level of sustainability at NYUAD. The report aims to:

- Identify current sustainability initiatives, practices and processes across the organisation and from various functions
- Highlight any interrelated issues and/or conflicts of interests within NYUAD or between relevant stakeholders
- Provide a comparative understanding of the current sustainability level of the organisation within the specific industry

It is intended to provide an indication of what issues are being covered and to what extent. As the report is prepared in a short timeframe, it is not able to take on board all stakeholders and their perceptions.

NYU and NYUAD

New York University (NYU) is a leading global university and like all universities in today's world, needs to adapt to a rapidly changing environment on both the expectations of a leading university to attract, retain and develop top talent and to fuel analysis, new knowledge and innovation for the whole improvement of sustainability. If not, then this could erode its leadership role and **reputation**.

NYU Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) is part of the answer to the broad **challenges** and as a very young university in its 10th year, has already developed a fully integrated campus in the United Arab Emirates to develop a modern unit of NYU to address all the major goals of sustainability. These goals include educating our students to face the challenges of the 21st century, characterized by sustainability concerns, environmental and energy constraints, global sourcing, and humanitarian goals. In the face of global competition, dwindling natural resources, and the complexity of societal needs, our future leaders will be those who can innovate, are inventive and entrepreneurial, and understand how technology is integrated within society.

<https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/academics/divisions/engineering.html>

With the recent appointment of a new Vice Chancellor, she has made it her priority and goal to put Sustainability at the forefront of NYUAD's mission and she is empowering the Leadership to stay ahead in our Sustainability mission. As part of our Annual Planning Reporting, this provides the opportunity to put forward compelling reasons for additional support.

Globalization and Change Environment

NYUAD has recruited an international student body through merit-based scholarships. The university is committed to teaching students of its importance in becoming future leaders of the world in which **cooperation** is an essential tool to protecting and maintaining the environment; developing more just communities and societies, towards a more balanced economic development; and offers innovative, rigorous and globally oriented curriculum. In fact, all students must take several courses in the Core program modeled to teaching how to apply a multidisciplinary thinking around the world's greatest challenges facing our globalizing and interconnected society.

(<https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/academics/undergraduate/core-curriculum.html>)

This curriculum was also in part inspired by the Sustainability Development Goals developed by the United Nations.

(<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>)

NYUAD is a magnet for talent and has also been able to recruit many of the world's leading faculty in Sustainability who are conducting groundbreaking research as well as advancing the latest teaching methods as detailed below in our Centers and Labs.

Current Sustainability Initiatives, Practices and Processes

UNDERGRADUATE Curriculum | The Environment Minor

The multidisciplinary minor in The Environment affords an outstanding opportunity for making connections among fundamental scientific and engineering concepts, economic and sociological forces, and literary and artistic endeavors. This inherently interdisciplinary subject intimately connects to our existence and is especially relevant in Abu Dhabi, which has made a significant commitment to environmental sustainability.

<https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/academics/undergraduate/majors-and-minors/the-environment-minor.htm>

RESEARCH | Centers and Lab

A major NYUAD research theme is Environmental Sustainability with work being conducted by the faculty in a number of areas including:

- The Advanced Materials and Building Efficiency Research Laboratory (AMBER Lab) working on building applications and development of sustainable urban infrastructure.
- The Center for Prototype Climate Modeling bridging the gap between climate theory, modeling, and observation, with the goal of better understanding fundamental processes in the earth system, and improving our ability to predict future climate.
- CITIES' goal to develop new ideas for increasing the Livability and Sustainability of our cities.
- Public Health Research Center addressing critical topics for Abu Dhabi in public health science, including diabetes and obesity.
- Water Research Center developing alternative low-cost sources of water while minimizing environmental impact.

<https://nyuad.nyu.edu/en/research/centers-labs-and-projects.html>

In telling our Sustainability story, below are some highlights of the groundbreaking research taking place at NYUAD both locally and internationally:

Marine Biologist John Burt uses the Arabian Gulf as his natural laboratory to study coral reef ecology in the Gulf in extreme environments and he also examines how coral communities respond to and recover from mass bleaching events, as well as ecological and management implications of coastal developments in urban areas to pursue a more sustainable coastal management practices in the Gulf.

David Holland, NYU faculty and NYUAD research and his team of scientists from the Centre for Sea Level Change captured on video a four-mile iceberg breaking away from a glacier in eastern Greenland, an event that points to one of the forces behind global sea-level rise. This was a highly sought after news story was also featured on National Geographic.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00_-JlbIftg

These technological and environmental initiatives and innovative and transformative solutions create opportunities for research and partnership as well as employment and expansion for business.

Increasing Customer Awareness of Environmental and Social Challenges

Though debatable, if students are customers, then the top students will be highly sensitive and engaged with the University's positioning. In addition, our faculty, partners and community are growing increasingly aware of environmental issues as can be seen around campus with the many activities and initiatives taking place. It is therefore imperative that we ensure we are at the leading edge of Sustainability and tackling pressing societal issues through fundamental and practical research and innovative and new initiatives.

Sustainability Initiatives, Practices and Process

Our sustainability efforts continue to advance through the work of our faculty including the [Precious Plastics Recycling Lab Abu Dhabi](#) on campus and is open to the NYUAD community and beyond. Our students also continue their innovative work on the solar house which was part of the Solar Decathlon Middle East competition last year and has lead them to Dubai Expo 2020.

Where are we on Sustainability?

In identifying where we are at as a University on Sustainability, there is no central source of information especially from NYUAD itself. Information is fragmented and as such, can lead to misunderstandings that the University is not in fact doing enough.

A good source of information on what the University is doing came from the student publication, The Gazelle and an article written by Rashtra Raj Bhandari, a climate columnist and now a Yenching Scholar at Peking University. In the article he says:

The university itself — which is largely funded by oil money — embodies the global pattern of excessive consumption of energy and water. As a small group of environmentalists on campus, we try to push for a more sustainable NYU Abu Dhabi.

<https://www.thegazelle.org/issue/143/opinion/advocating-for-a-sustainable-abu-dhabi>

The article also highlights some tangible work through the NYUAD Sustainability Executive Committee (SEC) made up of students, staff and faculty alongside other relevant stakeholders such as Facilities and Residential Education on a number of sustainability initiatives on campus which have included:

- The installation of a large number of recycling stations across campus
- The removal of plastic bags and plastic lined cups from the convenience store
- The organization of the annual Go Green Week
- Beach Nurdle Hunts
- Sustainable Menstruation campaigns;
- and the Love Food-Hate Waste program.

Local and Regional Input

Students are also working in the **community** with the Environment Agency of Abu Dhabi on a Sustainability Action Project and the Green House special interest group which carries out research and advocacy in climate policy and diplomacy in the UAE resulting in attendance and travel to the annual Conference of Parties negotiations with the support of the UAE Ministry of Climate Change and Environment.

The UAE continues to invest in **education** to strengthen the economy and ultimately strengthen local and regional business. NYUAD is working in collaboration and partnership with the government of Abu Dhabi in making a significant commitment to Climate Change through science, research, innovation, technology, development and analysis not only focusing on the region but also on important global issues.

What can we replicate from NYU?

As one of NYU's global sites, we have a great example we can follow. NYU's Sustainability Operations are outlined on the web, are easy to find and highlight their initiatives in a consolidated way. This style is a very easy fix for NYUAD and given that there is already a Sustainability Executive Committee, content could be provided by them and placed as a priority through the Web Team guided by the SEC.

<https://www.nyu.edu/life/sustainability/operations.html>

NYU Green Grants

These grants are open to NYUAD and any NYU student, faculty, and/or staff of NYU's global sites for applicants who see themselves as project leaders for a Green Grant.

<https://www.nyu.edu/life/sustainability/get-involved/green-grants.html>

This type of opportunity is something that could also be included in a central repository for Sustainability at NYUAD.

Where are the Gaps?

NYUAD **is not communicating** well to the student body, faculty and staff and perhaps to our partners and competition. This therefore could give the impression that we are not doing enough. Indeed as an honors college that prides itself on being one of the leading institutions in the world, it is essential that NYUAD takes a much stronger stance and presence on Sustainability through a more cohesive approach as the University's activities are fragmented. A greater initiative to strengthen our sustainability portfolio is required and whilst NYUAD is working on many initiatives in Sustainability, there appears to be no apparent formal, consolidated Sustainability Report and we should ensure accountability towards our Sustainability agenda.

Recommendations

This report recommends a pathway to a **more cohesive story**, to develop a **clearer sustainability agenda** across the board as much as possible and **provide greater transparency**. Indeed, no organization is immune and those who survive are resilient and have effective and efficient systems, processes and innovative strategies for achieving a sustainable competitive advantage in place.

Our stakeholders at NYUAD, including our faculty, students, staff, community and partners look to the university to be leaders in Sustainability and this ensures our long-term ability to compete. It is noted from a national US survey quoted at NYU, 63% of prospective students factor in the Sustainability of a university when deciding to apply to or attend that school.

<https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/publications/alumni-magazine/spring-2019/features/half-empty-or-half-full.html>

NYUAD needs to be **bolder** and view its work through a sustainability lens through which opportunities emerge that might not have otherwise been identified. Whilst we don't have all the answers and measures in place, we need to continue to learn and push ahead. **Greater Communication, Transparency and Accountability are key**. As with all companies, NYUAD needs to justify financials and budgets but can you put a price on Sustainability?

In embracing Sustainability, NYUAD's agenda could include:

Empowering our people. Greater employee engagement to help meet environmental goals by allowing employees time to participate in applying for and availing of Green Grants for example. This would result in intangible benefits to the university through employee ownership of projects, belonging and contributing to the university's Sustainability success. Stronger partnerships and community involvement could also result in a stronger NYUAD brand as a more appealing and desirable place to work.

Comparative Understanding of the Sustainability Level of the organisation within the Specific Industry

The University of Plymouth Sustainability Report sets a very good example of what we can do to further improve our Sustainability Goals at NYUAD that we don't appear to be doing already. Initiatives could include:

- Adopting the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) to measure performance across environmental, social and economic sustainability
- Setting clear targets to minimize our environmental footprint
- Identifying our key impacts with regards to the SDGs
- Highlighting areas we want to be seen and recognized for in our approach to sustainability such as flagship projects and awards.
- Creating factsheets of who we are and where we are going
- Highlighting our Sustainability approach to
- Centralizing our information for the University in general
- What is our biodiversity plan?
- Society and community - highlight our role in driving economic and social vitality
- Consider a green travel plan to reduce the impact of car travel on the campus as well as the local environment. We can look to promote sustainable travel options by offering incentives such as free bike share.
- To produce a Sustainability Report at the very least on an annual basis.

https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/uploads/production/document/path/13/13817/Sustainability_Report_2018.pdf

At NYUAD we are already working towards Sustainability in our teaching and learning; research; operations; supply chain; and compliance issues on workers. A real highlight of this is our on impact on Sustainability and Climate Change, through the University's collaborative research, collective insight and work to foster climate resilience with research specifically in our Resilient Systems.

We need to be telling these powerful stories in a way that it's clear to everyone at NYUAD and that we are extremely proud of. In addition, everyone at NYUAD has a Sustainability story to be part of and we need to engage and empower the whole community to be part of our Sustainability journey.