

A Reflection of Sustainable Leadership at New York University Abu Dhabi

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Introduction

New York University Abu Dhabi (NYUAD) is a remarkable example of an organization making a contribution to the concept of sustainable leadership. It is built from and based on leadership for the future and is achieving and demonstrating this through: its senior and academic leadership; in preparing its undergraduate and graduate students for sustainable leadership roles; through its academic programs; and its leading role in the community, country and globally. It is a new paradigm and model of education that has the generous support and backing of the Abu Dhabi Government to create and continue to strengthen the university as part of the knowledge and creative economy of Abu Dhabi for the UAE, the region and the world.

But *can the University do more?* This paper looks at ways in which the University is meeting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, 2020) set out by the United Nations through its leadership; it notes areas where more could be done, applied and learned from others in order to embody Sustainability more fully; and is a sustainable leadership story so far that looks ahead to developing a more cohesive story to further lead the NYUAD community to be part of this journey.

Given the odds have been in its favour, there is the opportunity to be greater sustainable leaders. Such favourable odds saw NYUAD begin from [the brainchild of two world renowned and phenomenal visionary leaders](#):

[His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan](#), Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces (Wikipedia, 2020), is known for his sustainable leadership involving projects and awards such as his involvement in The Zayed Sustainability Prize, the UAE's pioneering global award in sustainability and a tribute to the legacy of his late father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan (Zayed Sustainability Prize, 2020).

And [former President of New York University, John Sexton](#), whose list of sustainable leadership achievements include NYU reducing its carbon footprint by 30% through the construction of a state-of-the-art co-generation plant to provide electricity, heating, and cooling to many campus buildings (Wikipedia, 2020).

Both these extraordinary luminaries came together to create a university for the future through a meeting of minds with the announcement of the new University in October 2007 and the launch of the [NYU Global Network University](#), which began with NYU and NYU Abu Dhabi and was later followed in 2012 by NYU Shanghai as three degree granting campuses of NYU (Wikipedia, 2020).

Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Scholars Program (SMSP)

To begin with, Sheikh Mohamed and President Sexton launched the [Sheikh Mohamed Bin Zayed Scholars Program](#) (SMSP, 2020), a program open to outstanding students from the three UAE national universities: the Higher Colleges of Technology, the United Arab Emirates University, and Zayed University which extended the educational experience of NYU to others in the UAE providing scholars with unique access to specially designed courses, lectures, [leadership experiences](#), networking, and graduate school opportunities.

In 2009, a pinnacle of the program was the experience of viewing the historical [inauguration of President Barack Obama](#) from Pennsylvania Avenue. Also during this 2009 trip, the scholars visited New York an integral part of the SMSP designed to complement the academic component and enhance and expand educational, cultural, and political understanding; and they met people from the US Supreme Court and US Senate (HCT 2009).

The SMSP continues today for UAE based scholars regularly attending classes at NYUAD and often New York and in completing from the program graduates have gone onto leadership roles in the UAE and as well as at NYUAD further strengthening leadership capacity. Many alumni consider the SMSP as being highly influential in their personal and intellectual growth and leadership development (SMSP, 2020).

2010-2020

NYUAD is still a young university full of potential that [opened its doors to its first year freshmen students and academic programming in 2010](#). Not only the students joining the university at that time took a leap of faith with no upperclassmen to look to but so too did the faculty and staff. Along with this however came a freedom in this blank canvas to create something new, meaningful and extraordinary.

Described as the first comprehensive liberal arts and science campus in the Middle East operated by a major American research university, NYUAD integrates a highly-selective liberal arts, engineering and science curriculum with a world center for advanced research and scholarship enabling its students to succeed in an increasingly interdependent world and advance cooperation and progress on humanity's shared challenges. Students are equipped for leadership in all arenas of human endeavor (NYUAD, 2020).

The University works in partnership with the Government of Abu Dhabi to also align with the goals of the [Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030](#), a roadmap for the Emirate's economic progress including reduced reliance on the oil sector and greater focus on knowledge-based industries in the future (Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030).

Originally based in the downtown campus (DTC) of Abu Dhabi, people joined from the region but also much further afield and globally to be part this new venture and model of university demonstrating a certain character of risk and courage both great qualities to have as leaders. Indeed salaries and benefits are better than many other institutions but it is notably the [creative and diverse culture](#) and its extraordinary [pearl rated residential](#)

[campus](#) which NYUAD has occupied since 2014 on Saadiyat Island that provides further reason for people to stay and continue to take that leap of faith in joining the University as it continues to grow to its steady state in 2025. Coincidentally, Saadiyat in Arabic means Happiness and the forward thinking UAE Government has created roles for Ministers of Happiness and Youth and the University is proud that one its first graduates is the Minister of Youth (Wikipedia, 2020).

Now in its tenth year, the University has grown to an international student body made up of over 115 different nations speaking over 115 languages with approximately 1450 undergraduate students and 80 PhD students (NYUAD, 2020). In fact, there is no dominant nationality so it can be described as a truly [international university](#) with the advantage of having first hand shared insight to many international issues.

[Curriculum](#)

The University's new and second Vice Chancellor, Mariët Westermann credits the first ten years as follows: "NYUAD has established a new paradigm in higher education: a resolutely global university driven by leading-edge research and a curriculum that prepares our students to create a better world." (NYUAD, 2020)

The University is made up of four academic divisions offering 24 majors and a minor in The Environment.

Most notably in [Engineering](#), students and faculty are invited to solve the varied, complex, and cross-disciplinary challenges of the 21st century from the nano-scale to mega-projects, 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, the leaders of technological enterprises will be those who can innovate, are inventive and entrepreneurial, and understand how technology is integrated within society. Those who have joined are working in the areas of Civil Engineering creating reinforced bridges from sustainable green concrete developed at the university to the drones to deliver food during the global pandemic (NYUAD, 2020).

Scientists' work is extensive and also includes COVID-19 working closely in further developing Public Health through which they will take this to a new level of exploration that hasn't been seen so far at NYUAD. "As scientists, what we can do at this stage is use the data that has been collected over the last few months, look at the interventions that countries did and try to make predictions based on that information", said Professor Youssef Idaghdour (Gulf News, 2020).

And in **Arts & Humanities**, with the creation of the eARThumanities research initiative launched in the spring of 2017, NYUAD has taken a bold and significant step in building a locus of intellectual research and debate from which to contribute robustly to the emerging field of environmental humanities (NYUAD, 2020).

J-Term, which is held in January each year, is an opportunity for students to take a two to three week intensive course by some of the world's leading figures in their field. An incredible example is a class organized by **Social Science: The Europe in Crisis** class at NYUAD not only saw history happening, but they learned about it from the people making it happen. American political consultant and best-selling author Frank Luntz

taught the class noting: “It's hard to say what was more significant: meeting with two former UK prime ministers, interviewing the top advisors to the French President, or directly questioning the senior Brexit negotiators. From touring 10 Downing Street at the very moment Prime Minister Theresa May is considering stepping down to delivering the news personally to Tony Blair that Parliament had rejected the deal, it was a class in politics, communications, and history like no other -- and an unprecedented experience for the 16 students from 14 different countries (NYUAD, 2019).”

Miren Salazar, Class of 2019, majoring in Political Science with a minor in Chinese, also said: “The course on Brexit has provided me with the widest range of opinions I have ever been exposed to in any given topic. It has humanized the side of the argument that I thought was ‘wrong’ and problematized that which I thought was ‘right.’ *It is only with a holistic understanding of perspective and an awareness of the challenges that we can address issues like Brexit*, and this course has provided us with both fundamentals (NYUAD, 2019).”

University Leadership

What makes this all possible is the way the University has been set up by Sustainable and Visionary Leadership; the strength in the recruitment processes to attract students, faculty and staff; the leaderships’ extensive collaborative networks; and the University’s global reputation.

Perhaps some would say President Sexton could be the strongest sustainable leader a University could ever have to launch a new university. Through his own connections

and networks he was able to even attract former US President Bill Clinton as the first graduation speaker and the second was former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown. During his presidency until 2015, his sustainable achievements were many but included:

- The percentage of underrepresented minorities among students increased from 11% to 19%; and
- NYU built its first new dedicated science building in 30 years opening the Center for Genomics and Systems Biology in 2010

President Sexton also recruited some of the best visionary leaders to lead the University at its start up phase including the original group of leaders, known internally as the G4: the former Vice Chancellor, who was the former President of Swarthmore College in the US; the current Provost, who was one of the co-founding directors of the new Center for Genomics and Systems Biology noted above; the Senior Vice Provost was assigned to work extensively on attracting faculty including visiting National Academy members; and the late Deputy Vice Chancellor a founding member of the team who began planning NYUAD in September 2007 particularly responsible for the design of a new, globally oriented curriculum and the three-million square-foot campus on Saadiyat Island. Not all universities of course have this privilege or the resources to make such opportunities possible. But the continued investment and belief in the Mission continues to result in extraordinary success.

Student Awards and Scholarships

The University is proud of its many awards and scholarships including 14 [Rhodes Scholars](#), more per student than any university in the world (NYUAD, 2020). The students also often credit the faculty for guiding them through their studies as well as in their applications which include the [Zayed Sustainability Award](#), and the [Schwarzman and Yenching Scholarships](#), which they are also recipients of. As a result, faculty too have been recognized in receiving awards such as the Rhodes Trust Inspirational Educator Award (NYUAD, 2020).

However following the death of [George Floyd](#) due to police brutality in the US, colonialists like Cecil Rhodes have become more controversial as the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement has brought new energy and urgency to those demanding a fuller and more honest confrontation with institutional legacies of slavery, imperialism, colonialism, White supremacy, racial exclusion and bias according to The Rhodes Trust (2020). The Rhodes Trust also states that the original endowment from Rhodes is now a small percentage of the Rhodes endowment, as contributions have been made from alumni, friends, and strategic partners of Scholarships which has enabled expansion to new parts of the world. The Rhodes Scholarship has developed a meaning and reputation that far transcends its founder ... defined by the lives and stories of all the Scholars who have gone before, including those who overcame extraordinary obstacles to win the world's preeminent graduate scholarship (Rhodes Trust, 2020). Governors of Oxford University's Oriel College have since voted to remove his statue from the

University of Oxford (Forbes, 2020). Perhaps the scholarship can in the future be accepted as reparation for such injustices?

University Ranking

NYUAD's international ranking includes eleventh in the QS Graduate Employability Rankings (NYUAD, 2020) and another ranking the University is proud of is NYUAD Economics faculty ranked fifth in 2019 within the Asian region by Research Papers in Economics (RePEc). Since May 2020, it is also noted that Economics is listed in fourth place (IDEAS/RePEc, 2019).

The Dean of [Social Science](#) and Professor of Economics Hervé Crès said: "Climbing the RePEc ranking for Asia is a remarkable achievement for a ten year old university. NYUAD is an emerging champion on a continent that currently shapes the future of mankind, which truly gives us a sense of responsibility."

Sustainable Business and Practice

An area however that does not appear so evident or represented at NYUAD is Sustainable Business in terms of suppliers, curriculum and executive education. Inspiration could be drawn from *Sustainable Change, The state and face of sustainable business in Belgium - Cases* (ING Antwerp University, 2020). ING worked together with Antwerp Management School to produce the report in which ten corporate executives provide insight into their processes; how sustainability is being implemented; opinions

behind the attention for sustainability; emphasis on demonstrating challenges; and noting that working on sustainability is a 'work in progress'.

From the report, the University could adopt a [methodology](#) to develop a questionnaire for a sample representative group from the university community with a view to obtaining more detailed, qualitative insights from questions such as:

- How is the University implementing sustainable business practices?
- Which sustainability projects are isolated and lacking integration?
- What are the positive effects and barriers encountered in the process towards sustainable change?
- What lessons can be learned from the experiences?
- How do we take steps to approach sustainability in a more structured way?
- At what stage of sustainability does your unit identify with: is it more advanced or still beginning the process?
- What would you like to see as three sustainability pillars?

NYUAD should also be looking at its **suppliers** to see if they are demonstrating [corporate social responsibility](#). The report notes the importance of the 3 P's: social ('People'); ecological concerns ('Planet'); and aligning these with economic and financial performance ('Profit'). In fact, integrating the [3 P's - People, Planet, Profit](#) - is widely considered to be the success formula for future-proof business. This would demonstrate a stronger ambition to sustainability especially in light of ongoing budgetary constraints.

A defining moment for sustainability could be to emulate Aquafin, one of the corporations interviewed in the report, who described the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a list of what is going well and to determine where improvement is needed. Taking this inspiration further, below is a sample of the [NYUAD SDG list](#) with further input required from the NYUAD community:

Goal 1: No Poverty

Extreme Poverty in the Modern World: Measurement and Global Trends was a talk given by leading experts affiliated with Social Science (NYUAD, 2018).

Goal 2: Zero Hunger

The J-Term Course on "Water, Energy, Food Nexus" was taught by a UAE Minister looking at sustainable agriculture and biotechnology (Gulf News, 2019).

Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being

This is promoted throughout the university and recently well-being has been expanded as a result of COVID-19.

Goal 4: Quality Education

Through the academic undergraduate and graduate programs offered to students from all backgrounds around the world. A measure of this is the Minister of Youth establishing "youth circles" allowing young people to register to participate in consultative meetings to explore significant issues such as climate change and education (Wikipedia 2020).

Goal 5: Gender Equality

The university is working towards this across the board through various hiring strategies; and the UAE tops global ranking for women in parliament (The National, 2020).

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation

The NYUAD Water Research Center was recently established (NYUAD Centers, 2020).

Goal 7: Affordable and Clean Energy

Through The Environment Minor; and the UAE has extensive renewable energy and infrastructure.

Goal 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth

The university is a leading organization in the region and is proud of its achievements in this area.

Goal 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure

Through scholarly work in Transportation, Urban Systems, Mechanical and Civil Engineering as well as Robotics.

Goal 10: Reduced Inequality

Social Science and the Office of Compliance work extensively in this area.

Goal 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities

The CITIES Research Center was recently set up (NYUAD Centers, 2020).

Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production

Work on hydroponics, and working towards a reduction in consumerism.

Goal 13: Climate Action

Extensive student groups and Sustainability Committee at the University.

Goal 14: Life Below Water

Marine Biology faculty work extensively on sustaining coral reefs (NYUAD Labs, 2020).

Goal 15: Life on Land

Conservation of local wildlife and habitat; and Mangrove Adaptation (NYUAD Labs, 2020).

Goal 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions

Through J-Term courses, Peace Speaker Series and the SMSP.

Goal 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

Strongly supported by the Abu Dhabi Government partners and partnerships with the Environment Agency for example.

While this is by no means a complete list, it could be developed further to also highlight areas where improvement is needed. SDGs are measurable goals and the University could put a stronger focus on this and publish results to ensure continued and stronger awareness of the University's role in Sustainability.

Becoming Sustainability Leaders

Furthermore, the research-based Sustainability Leadership Relational Model[®] (2009) illustrates the interrelationship of behavioral themes practiced by effective sustainability leaders which includes:

- Taking responsibility in making sustainability relevant to others
- Looking for holistic interconnections
- Convening constructive conversations
- Engaging experts as collaborators
- Embracing creative tension by inviting diverse voices and perspectives
- Facilitating outcomes in continually assessing opportunities and risks
- Understanding social change dynamics in noticing and making sense of patterns
- Expanding conscious awareness in grounding conversations and action in personal integrity

Business Curriculum

As a liberal arts college with science and engineering, Sustainability Leadership programs from a business perspective tend to belong in Business Schools and the philosophy of NYUAD up until now has not included a Business School. However, times are rapidly changing and in light of recent global events this may be a good time to consider adding this as part of the university's Sustainable Leadership agenda.

Looking to NYU, there is the NYU Stern Center for Sustainable Business (CSB) which offers fellowships, boot camps, and case competitions to prepare students to pursue careers in sustainability; increase their academic and professional competitiveness and position them at the forefront of thought leadership on the future of business.

Undergraduate, graduate, or executive students, examine the unique role and shifting expectations of the private sector and gain a broad understanding of how embedding

sustainability into business strategy benefits financial performance and management practices (NYU Stern, 2020).

Other Business Schools offering Sustainability Leadership courses include:

The University of Wales Trinity St David Carmarthen Business School (2020) has an online MBA in Sustainability Leadership; and The London Business School (2020) has an online Sustainability Leadership Certificate.

It is undoubtedly more feasible to launch an online certificate program given the tremendous resources needed to launch majors. The University is now much more familiar with [online learning](#) during this period COVID-19 therefore looking at classes taught through webinars, online submission of materials etc would certainly strengthen the University's role in Sustainable Leadership.

In addition, according to the London Business School:

Sustainability should be embedded in every stage of the recruitment process, including creating environmental and social goals balanced with the more traditional financial ones; making sustainability priorities clear in job descriptions; and asking candidates' their views on sustainability during the interview process: "75% of millennials would rather take a pay cut than work for a socially irresponsible company".

Communications

The University's commitment and communications both internally and externally are equally as important in order to motivate the workforce or attract new people. Website, media and branding should include Sustainability and an example of a recent marketing

campaign in collaboration with the Public Affairs Department to recruit candidates to the Global PhD Fellowships is a measure of how the University can further achieve this. This resulted in free ads on LinkedIn featuring Environmental Sustainability and a leading faculty whose work on making cement out of leftover sea salt would appeal to all audiences interested in Sustainability (NYUAD LinkedIn, 2020).

A New Future

As a university preparing students to be global leaders, now more than ever, it is essential to assess and reflect how best to achieve this given the uncertainty of today and the future ahead. The world is in the midst of a pandemic from COVID-19 creating a global economic crisis and recession as well as social unrest following the death of George Floyd. There has never been a more disruptive time like it in our lifetimes. Sustainable leadership prepares organizations to cope with change to become stronger in a Volatile Uncertain Complex Ambiguous (VUCA) world. We need “individuals who are compelled to make a difference by deepening their awareness of themselves in relation to the world around them. In doing so, they adopt new ways of seeing, thinking and interacting that result in innovative, sustainable solutions” (Sustainability Leadership Institute, 2016).

This time requires adaptive, resilient, courageous and visionary leaders; to be part of the solution and not the problem; and to help communities rethink consumerism, reap the benefits from reduced carbon emissions and travel and reconsider some needs that have dominated for too long that may no longer be needed or valued any more.

These challenges call for wider collaborative networks and interconnectedness among multiple stakeholders facilitating engagement; information sharing; and stronger value systems. It is time to give back more in creating new innovative and Sustainable Leaders for this new era by not only further developing students but through Sustainable Leadership Business education for the community at large who have an important role to play in advancing Sustainability and society in general.

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