

# Working Papers on University Reform

**Working Paper 45:**

## **Academics Exchanging Experiences and Ideas for Sustainable Education**



**Emma Lynge Lyngbye & Jonas Andreasen Lysgaard**

**EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY**

**CENTRE FOR  
HIGHER  
EDUCATION  
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## ***Working Papers on University Reform***

### ***Series Editor: Susan Wright***

This working papers series is published by the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. The series brings together work in progress in Denmark and among an international network of scholars involved in research on universities and higher education.

The current paper arises from a project funded by the organisation ‘Education for Sustainable Development’ (Uddannelse for Bærdygtig Udvikling (UBU)), which is working to integrate sustainable education at all levels, from pre-school to life-long learning. The university panel of UBU commissioned the Danish Students’ Union (DSF) and the Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF) to run a series of workshops to support the development of sustainable education among students, lecturers and university leaders. Previous reports have covered the first two student workshops, ‘Action for Education for Sustainability’ and ‘Students as Drivers of Education for Sustainability’, both held at the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University. This is the report from the third workshop for lectures and academics, called ‘Exchanging Experiences and Ideas for Sustainable Education’ held online on 28 May 2025. The final seminar in the series for university leaders is planned for 2026.

Other papers in this working paper series are derived from previous projects:

- ‘European Universities – Critical Futures’ funded by the Danish Research Council
- ‘Research for impact: Integrating research and societal impact in the humanities PhD’
- ‘Practicing Integrity’, funded by the Danish Ministry of Higher Education and Science
- ‘Universities in the Knowledge Economy’ (UNIKE) an EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie ITN-project
- ‘University Reform, Globalisation and Europeanisation’ (URGE), an EU Marie Skłodowska-Curie IRSES knowledge-exchange project
- ‘New Management, New Identities, Danish University Reform in an International Perspective’, funded by the Danish Research Council

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**Academics Exchanging Experiences and Ideas for  
Sustainable Education.**

**A webinar for lectures and teachers within higher  
education institutions in Denmark**

Emma Lynge Lyngbye & Jonas Andreasen Lysgaard

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## **Introduction**

The webinar *“Academics Exchanging Experiences and Ideas for Sustainable Education”* was held on May 28<sup>th</sup>, 2025, and was organized by the National Union of Students in Denmark (DSF), Centre for Higher Education Futures (CHEF, DPU), and the Danish organisation Uddannelse for Bæredygtig Udvikling (UBU; Education for Sustainable Development, ESD).

This webinar was part of a series of four events aimed at engaging students, academics, teachers, and leaders in fostering greater awareness of - and improving - education for sustainability within higher education institutions in Denmark. The two previous events - *“Student Activism for Education for Sustainability”*, held on December 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and *“Students as Drivers of Education for Sustainable Transformation”*, held on February 20–21<sup>st</sup>, 2025, focused on student perspectives and their role in shaping university education to contribute to a green and just transition. This is the 3<sup>rd</sup> event in the series. The final event in the series will focus on reaching leaders and management from higher education institutions in Denmark.

For this third webinar, 49 lecturers, teachers, and researchers from educational institutions in Denmark signed up to participate in the discussion on possible barriers and potentials for integrating sustainability and interdisciplinarity into higher education. The registered participants came from a range of institutions, including the University of Copenhagen, the University of Southern Denmark, Aarhus University, Aalborg University, Roskilde University, Copenhagen Business School, the Technical University of Denmark, the Danish School of Media and Journalism, University College Copenhagen, and University College Absalon.

The webinar was divided into two parts. The first part consisted of four presentations, which together offered insights into different perspectives on sustainability and various ways of integrating it into higher education. The second part invited participants to discuss everyday teaching practices related to sustainability and future ambitions for further integrating sustainability into current educational processes and initiatives.

## **Part 1. Perspectives and Practices in Education for Sustainability**

### ***Conceptual Framework for Education for Sustainability***

*Jonas Lysgaard, Associate Professor at the Danish Institute of Education (DPU), Aarhus University.*

The first presentation was by Jonas Lysgaard. He provided a conceptual framework to help structure the day's discussions, outlining different ways in which sustainability could be understood in education. He introduced three interconnected dimensions:

- Learning *about* sustainability, focusing on content and understanding global changes and challenges.
- Learning *for* sustainability, a more normative perspective aimed at empowering learners to take positive action.
- Learning *as* sustainability, which positioned education itself as an ongoing, lifelong process central to navigating the complexity of sustainable development.

Taken together, these three dimensions clarify both the *what*, the *why*, and the *how* of Education for Sustainability. Learning *about* provides a shared knowledge of urgent global challenges; learning *for* strengthens the normative commitment and action competence to address them; and learning *as* reminds us that education itself must model the adaptive, lifelong, and relational practices we seek to cultivate. This framework clarifies what to look for: not only where sustainability content appears, but whether programmes cultivate action competence and enact sustainable, collaborative, lifelong learning in everyday practice. It invites us to assess both curriculum and pedagogy - content, commitment, and conduct - rather than treating sustainability as a topic alone.

## **Mapping Education for Sustainability in Universities in Denmark**

*Emma Lyngbe Lyngbye, Educational Anthropologist and Research Assistant at the Danish Institute of Education (DPU), Aarhus University.*

The second presentation was by Emma Lyngbe Lyngbye. She presented a project that mapped the availability of sustainability education in different study programs and universities in Denmark. Her findings highlighted notable differences in how sustainability is integrated into curricula, for example at Copenhagen Business School (CBS) and Roskilde University (RUC).

At CBS, the mapping showed significant variation between bachelor programs. For example, the *Business, Language and Culture* program includes as many as seven mandatory courses focused on sustainability. In contrast, the traditional *Business Economics* program (HA-almen) does not have any mandatory sustainability-focused courses. Emma suggested that the absence of sustainability as a required subject in the Business Economics program, may indicate that it is not yet viewed as a core part of business education. This raises an important question: are future economists being educated to think sustainably?

Although students in the Business Economics program have access to 21 elective courses related to sustainability, there is no guarantee they will choose them. Emma emphasized that this approach makes sustainability an individual choice rather than a shared educational foundation. When sustainability is only offered as an elective, it risks being treated as a niche topic rather than a shared academic responsibility.

At RUC, the mapping showed similar patterns of uneven integration. Within the humanities bachelor program, there were no sustainability-related subject modules, whereas the natural sciences included several modules focused on sustainability. This again raises questions about what it means when sustainability is not embedded in certain fields of study. Emma argued that the humanities can play a crucial role in sustainability — for example, in understanding how people relate to nature, shaping climate narratives, and examining how values and identities influence the green transition. The absence of sustainability in humanities curricula could mean that students in these programs are not fully equipped to contribute meaningfully to sustainability agendas.

Overall, the mapping provided valuable insight into where sustainability education is present and where it is absent. This, in turn, raised a broader question about whether sustainability should remain an optional interest, or become a shared academic responsibility across disciplines?

## ***Student-Led Initiatives and Experiences***

*Camille Koefoed and Victor Eltorp, students in Pedagogical Anthropology at the Danish School of Education (DPU), Aarhus University, and Rune Bak, Vice President for Education in the national union of students, Danske Studerendes Fællesråd (DSF).*

During the third presentation, Camille, Victor, and Rune shared their experiences with Education for Sustainability at DPU. They shared their reflections from the second event in the UBU series *Students as Drivers of Education for Sustainable Transformation*. It was developed in collaboration between DPU and Humboldt University in Berlin. The workshop was run by students from Humboldt University using peer-to-peer teaching. The students described the event as a collaborative and empowering workshop that supported them to move from abstract ideas to practical and actionable projects.

Camille introduced the three-stage process the students worked through:

1. The Dream Journey – envisioning what a more sustainable university could look like.
2. Idea Development – transforming visions into concrete, workable ideas.
3. The Method Circle – creating implementation strategies using tools such as project canvases, timelines, and stakeholder mapping.

From this process, several student-led projects emerged. One of these, the *Social Hub*, aimed to create a space at the university where students could meet, collaborate, and relax — a place to foster social sustainability. Reflecting on the idea, Camille explained: “We realized that we lacked a space for community, somewhere academic growth and social connection could thrive together.”

Victor expanded on the *Social Hub* project, emphasizing how tools like the project timeline and stakeholder mapping were crucial in navigating challenges. Since the students developing the project had never worked on an initiative like this before, they sometimes

struggled to determine the next step. The timeline provided structure and ensured that progress was consistently aligned with the final goal. Victor also highlighted the importance of identifying and engaging supportive stakeholders, who could help the students navigate university structures and move the project forward.

Rune offered a more critical reflection. While he acknowledged the strengths of the projects, he observed that many of them failed to integrate scientific or curricular knowledge in a meaningful way. He noted a tendency among students to keep academic knowledge and action-oriented projects separate - possibly due to concerns about academic authority or fears of “misusing” knowledge. “We want to be change makers,” Rune said, “but there seems to be a barrier between scientifically understood knowledge and the activity of change-making.” He called on educators to consider how teaching can better support the development of action competence - the ability and confidence to apply academic knowledge in real-world contexts.

## ***Teaching for the Anthropocene***

*Laura Horn, researcher and lecturer in the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University, RUC.*

The fourth presentation was held by Laura Horn. She reflected on her own practices and the philosophical and pedagogical challenges of integrating sustainability into higher education. Her contribution was structured around three elements: the principles that guided her teaching, examples of how these were put into practice, and the contradictions and challenges that arose from working with sustainability in an educational context.

Laura questioned the term ‘sustainability’ to highlight both its richness and its tensions. She drew on a graph (Figure 1) showing the frequency of the word’s usage over time. She explained that the term began appearing more often in the 1960s and had since shown a steady linear development. According to the graph, if this trend continues, by 2036 the word ‘sustainable’ will occur an average of once per page, by 2061 it will appear once per sentence, and by 2109 all sentences will consist exclusively of the word ‘sustainable’. Laura stressed that when we talk about sustainable and education, it is crucial - and inherently political - to be clear about what we actually mean by ‘sustainable’.

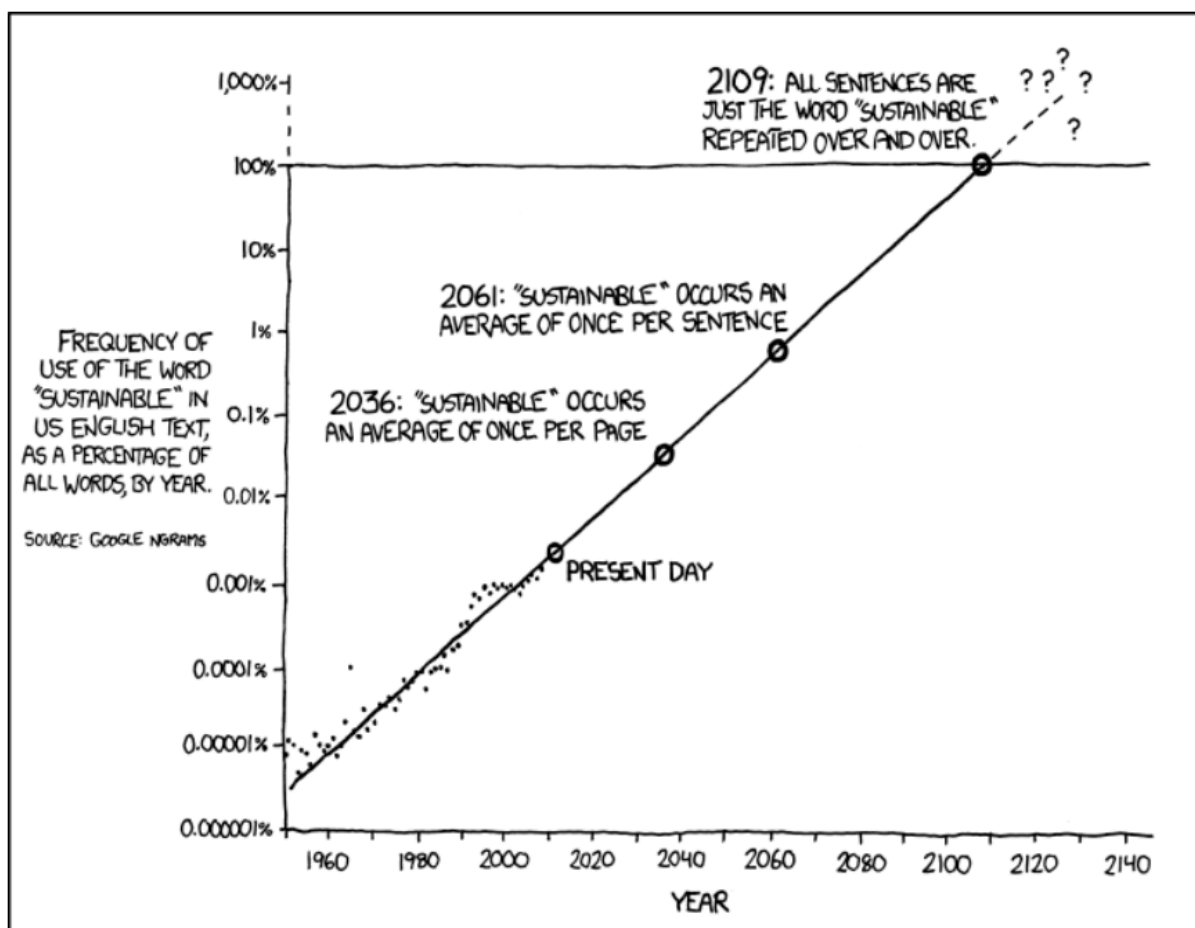


Figure 1. Frequency of use of the word 'Sustainable'

Source: <https://xkcd.com/1007/>

Laura emphasized that educators must also focus on *how* to teach, not only *what* to teach. She argued that the tendency in academia was to jump straight to content - asking "What do we teach about sustainability?" - without first reflecting on the pedagogical methods that make this teaching meaningful and enable students to engage with the material. Laura illustrated this with an example from her own faculty. When discussing the development of a climate literacy module, her vice-dean suggested simply adding more sustainability-themed case studies to existing courses, implying that the curriculum would then be "green." Laura pointed out that while well-intentioned, this approach did not align with what students were actually asking for, nor did it reflect the transformative thinking required for sustainability education.

Instead, she called for a fundamental rethinking of learning and teaching in the Anthropocene. She emphasized the need for collaborative, transformative, and empowering forms of learning that prepare students to navigate and respond to complex societal issues.

In this context, Laura highlighted the challenge that if sustainable education is to evolve, teachers must not only change what they teach but also how they teach. This, however, requires training and significant time - time that is often scarce, as most university teachers are also researchers. Laura noted that teachers do not get gold stars for teaching, explaining that academic careers are largely assessed based on research applications and publications.

Laura also reflected on questions of credibility and agency in sustainability teaching. She posed a provocative question: Can a teacher be trusted to teach sustainability if they regularly fly to academic conferences around the world? Would students then trust that teacher's judgement? She invited participants to consider: Who are the teachers of tomorrow, and what are their own agency, roles, and constraints?

She then turned to the question of equity in access to sustainability education, asking: *Who is learning? Who is learning when, what, and how? And who cannot learn?* She pointed to global inequities, noting for example that there are currently no universities left in Gaza, highlighting the privileges and institutional contexts that shape and limit the possibilities of sustainability education.

Finally, Laura addressed the pressures students are under, including the growing mental health crisis and the strain on welfare-state support systems. These realities, she argued, call for embodied and situated pedagogies that make space for students' diverse experiences, struggles, and capacities. In her view, sustainability education must not only equip students with knowledge, but must also create learning environments that are humane, inclusive, and supportive.

## **Part 2. Envisioning the Future of Sustainable Education**

### ***Question 1: Sustainable Education – Approaches, Practices, and Reflections***

In the second part of the webinar, participants were first invited to engage in group discussions about their current approaches and practices in Education for Sustainability. They were asked to reflect on the questions:

- What are you teaching in terms of Education for Sustainability?
- What do your pedagogical didactics look like from a disciplinary perspective?
- What barriers and potentials are facing Sustainable Education in Denmark?

When the groups returned from their discussions on Education for Sustainability, several common themes emerged alongside some discipline-specific insights.

One group described how Education for Sustainability is already being taught across different levels and disciplines, though in varied ways. At UCL (Erhvervsakademi og Professionshøjskole), the *SustainComp* 10 ECTS curriculum has been implemented in teacher education, focusing on sustainable competences and using action-based, interdisciplinary approaches. At Copenhagen University, KU Science, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is embedded in science communication courses. The focus is on transdisciplinarity and on bringing in students' experiences beyond their own disciplines. Across institutions, there was agreement that sustainability is increasingly being integrated into existing courses rather than remaining isolated in stand-alone "sustainability modules."

On pedagogy, the groups highlighted a clear preference for active, collaborative, and open-ended learning. Students learn best when working on authentic, often messy, real-world problems that required interdisciplinary thinking. Several examples were given where students collaborated across disciplines to co-create solutions. However, institutional structures often make this difficult. One group noted that even when students from the humanities and natural sciences wanted to work together, they were not allowed to due to formal restrictions. Faculty were seen less as traditional lecturers and more as facilitators or co-learners in these contexts, particularly when students initiated or even led parts of the learning process.

The barriers to advancing Education for Sustainability were widely discussed. Structural limitations, such as rigid faculty boundaries and a lack of mechanisms for interdisciplinary courses, remain a major obstacle. Job insecurity for early-career academics was also raised as a barrier, as many lecturers feel compelled to focus on "survival" rather than innovation. Definitions of 'sustainability' also differ across disciplines, creating uncertainty. Furthermore, Education for Sustainability is often voluntary or elective, which means that students who are not already motivated or engaged in this topic, might not encounter it.

Despite these barriers, the groups also saw potential for integrating sustainability across the curriculum - implementing sustainability education in all disciplines in ways relevant to each field. Student-led initiatives, such as peer-to-peer teaching and co-research, were repeatedly identified as highly effective in building engagement and competence. Collaboration with external actors - from NGOs to industry - was highlighted as an important way to bring legitimacy, relevance, and authenticity to Education for Sustainability. Several groups stressed that institutional frameworks like Humboldt University's *Universitetspædagogikum* could help formalize sustainability as a standard component of teaching practice.

Some groups also reflected on classrooms and institutional frameworks. They argued that classrooms that enabled flexible, project-based, collaborative work were seen as the most successful environments for Education for Sustainability. But many agreed that the integration of sustainability still depends heavily on the commitment of individual teachers. The political positioning of sustainability was also mentioned - some suggested that depoliticizing sustainability discussions and focusing on shared priorities could make implementation smoother.

Finally, there was a shared emphasis on Education for Sustainability as being more than just knowledge transmission. Groups stressed that Education for Sustainability must also be about competences - system thinking, collaboration, critical reflection, and the agency to act. Students responded most strongly when they could see sustainability in action - through projects, partnerships, and faculty who modelled sustainability practices rather than only speaking about them.

## **Question 2: The Future of Sustainable Education – Wish list and Pathways**

Participants were invited to return to their previous groups to discuss

- What is the future of Sustainable Education?
- What is on your wish list for the future, and how can those aspirations be achieved?

Feedback from one group began by stating that in the future, sustainability should not be something reserved for a few specialized courses. Instead, it should be integrated into all disciplines - woven into the fabric of teaching in ways that make sense for each subject area.

Another group stressed the importance of genuine interdisciplinarity. They proposed dedicated 7.5–10 ECTS interdisciplinary electives where students from different faculties could collaborate on real-world sustainability challenges. There was strong agreement that Education for Sustainability must include Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts alongside the natural sciences and technical disciplines, so that cultural, ethical, and social aspects are addressed as part of sustainability work.

A recurring point was the need to link the green transition with social justice, ensuring sustainability is not addressed in isolation from societal concerns. Many in the room felt that empowering student-led change would be a powerful lever for this. Students should not only be recipients of sustainability teaching but also co-creators of it, with structures that support peer-to-peer learning and student-initiated teaching.

To make this vision possible, several groups outlined what would be needed. Institutional and career support was at the top of the list. There should be dedicated funding, recognition and stability for early-career academics who take on the work of developing Education for Sustainability. Structural support for interdisciplinarity was highlighted as essential, with administrative systems needing not only to permit but also to actively encourage collaboration across faculties and disciplines. One example discussed was the model used at Humboldt University, where interdisciplinarity is built into the structure of the bachelor's degree through the *Überfachlicher Wahlpflichtbereich*, meaning the *Interdisciplinary Elective Area*. This is a compulsory part of the bachelor's degree, where students are required to take modules outside their regular field of study. The purpose of this interdisciplinary elective area is to strengthen students' interdisciplinary competences and support the development of connections across disciplines, while encouraging them to bring knowledge and perspectives from other fields back into their main area of study.

Visibility was another theme. Many felt that excellent work on Education for Sustainability is already being done, but it is fragmented and often invisible at the policy and management levels. Sharing successful initiatives and making them visible across institutions could help build momentum.

Finally, there was a call for the same level of institutional commitment to sustainability as is currently being shown to AI in education. Participants argued that sustainability deserves comparable resources, incentives, and strategic attention.

The plenary closed with a sense that while barriers are real, the vision for Sustainable Education is clear: interdisciplinary, integrated, competence-oriented, authentic, and supported at all levels of the institution.

## **Conclusion**

During the webinar both the progress and the persistent challenges in advancing Education for Sustainability within Danish higher education were highlighted. Across the contributions and discussions, a common understanding emerged: sustainability cannot remain a marginal or elective concern but must become a shared responsibility within all disciplines, pedagogical practices, and institutional frameworks.

Several key themes cut across the day's exchanges. First, the need to recognize and value diverse disciplinary contributions was strongly emphasized. Whether through the social sciences, humanities, natural sciences, or professional programs, each field holds unique insights into the cultural, ethical, and practical dimensions of sustainability. Second, the importance of pedagogy itself was underlined. Transformative learning cannot be reduced to content alone; it requires active, collaborative, and situated forms of teaching that foster competence, critical reflection, and agency. Third, student voices and initiatives remain central. Peer-to-peer teaching, co-creation, and student-led projects were repeatedly identified as powerful levers for change, while also highlighting the barriers students face in bridging knowledge with action.

The future vision expressed by participants was clear: Education for Sustainability should be interdisciplinary, competence-oriented, and socially just. It must equip students not only with knowledge but also with the ability to act, collaborate, and critically engage with the pressing challenges of the Anthropocene. Realizing this ambition demands more than isolated projects or add-on case studies; it requires coordinated, institution-wide change with clear priorities, incentives, and accountability.

The webinar served not only as a forum for reflection but also as a collective call to action. The final event in this series will turn to higher education leaders, who hold the institutional authority to translate these ideas into long-term commitments. The responsibility is shared across students, educators, and management alike: to ensure that sustainability is not an elective ambition, but a defining principle of education in Denmark.

# Appendix 1

## Program

### Academics Exchanging Experiences and Ideas for Sustainable Education

#### Part 1.

##### 12.00 Framing Education for Sustainability

A conceptual framework for understanding sustainability in education through three interconnected dimensions: learning *about* sustainability, learning *for* sustainability, and learning *as* sustainability.

##### 12.10 Mapping Sustainability Across Danish Study Programmes

A presentation on how sustainability is embedded differently across higher education programmes in Denmark, and what these differences reveal about disciplinary priorities and shared academic responsibility.

##### 12.20 Students as Drivers of Sustainable Transformation

Reflections from a peer-to-peer workshop on how students developed concrete sustainability projects through collaborative methods, and on the challenges of connecting academic knowledge with action-oriented change.

##### 12.30 Rethinking Sustainability Pedagogy in Higher Education

A reflection on the challenges of integrating sustainability into higher education, focusing on pedagogical approaches, conceptual tensions, and the need to rethink both what is taught and how it is taught.

#### Part 2.

##### 12.40 Group discussion – Barriers and Potentials for Sustainable Education

In small groups, participants will share teaching experiences, explore disciplinary approaches, and identify key barriers and opportunities for advancing Education for Sustainability in Danish Higher Education.

##### 13.00 Return to plenum – Sharing Insights on Sustainable Education

Groups are invited to share key points from their discussions, elaborating on the barriers and potentials they have encountered in their teaching practices to help build a collective understanding of what Education for Sustainability entails.

##### 13.20 Wishlist - The Future of Sustainable Education

In small groups, participants are invited to discuss their visions for the future of Education for Sustainability.

##### 13.40 Return to plenum – Collecting Ideas for the Future

The small groups are invited to share their discussions and suggest how they envision the development of Education for Sustainability, with the aim of generating a collective list of ideas for future action.

##### 14.00 Thank you for today

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1. Setting Universities Free? The background to the self-ownership of Danish Universities, Jakob Williams Ørberg, July 2006.
2. Trust in Universities - Parliamentary debates on the 2003 university law, Jakob Williams Ørberg, October 2006.
3. Histories of RUC - Roskilde University Centre, Else Hansen, November 2006.
4. An Insight into the Ideas Surrounding the 2003 University Law - Development contracts and management reforms, Peter Brink Andersen, November 2006.
5. Who Speaks for the University? - Legislative frameworks for Danish university leadership 1970-2003, Jakob Williams Ørberg, May 2007
6. 'After Neoliberalism'? - The reform of New Zealand's university system, Cris Shore, June 2007
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17. Researching Academic Agency in the Cultural Production of Indigenous Ideology in New Zealand Universities, Elizabeth Rata, April 2011

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21. Methodologies for Studying University Reform and Globalization: Combining Ethnography and Political Economy, Cris Shore and Miri Davidson (et al.), March 2013
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23. Shooting Arrows – Disruptions, Intersections and Tracing Lines in Gender Research, Kirsten Locke, April 2014
24. Research Assessment Systems and their Impacts on Academic Work in New Zealand, the UK and Denmark - Summative Working Paper for URGE Work Package 5 Susan Wright, Bruce Curtis, Lisa Lucas and Susan Robertson, April 2014
25. The mobile academic - A survey of mobility among Marie Skłodowska-Curie doctoral fellows, Lisbeth Kristine Walakira and Susan Wright , May 2017
26. Translating 'research integrity' into policy and practice – HEI leaders as political and academic mediators. Lise Degn, October 2017
27. Mapping the Integrity Landscape: Organisations, Policies, Concepts. Rachel Douglas Jones and Susan Wright, October 2017
28. Higher Education and Brexit: Current European Perspectives. Edited by Aline Courtois. Foreword by Simon Marginson, Marijk van der Wende and Susan Wright, February 2018
29. Final Report of the Project 'Practicing Integrity'. Susan Wright (PI), Lise Degn, Laura Louise Sarauw, Rachel Douglas-Jones, Jakob Williams Ørberg, October 2019.
30. (De)constructing the 'scientist with integrity': A case study of research integrity training for PhD fellows in the medical sciences. Laura Louise Sarauw and Simone Mejding Poulsen January 2020
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40. Education for Sustainability - Report of conference discussions and proposals for educational development. Susan Wright, June 2024
41. Gender Inequity and Precarity in European Neoliberal Academia. Charlotte Morris, Filomena Parada, Marie-Pierre Moreau, Veronika Paksi, Barbara Read, Marie Sautier, Katalin Tardos, November 2024
42. The societal turn of the university. A multi-scalar study of third mission in doctoral education. Søren S.E. Bengtsen, August 2025
43. Activism for Education for Sustainability. Susan Wright and Emma Lynge Lyngbye, August 2025
44. Students as Drivers of Education for Sustainable Transition. Workshop on Turning Ideas into Reality. Susan Wright and Emma Lynge Lyngbye, with Victor Elsby Kragh Eltorp and Rune Bak, August 2025