

# **University Alliance for Sustainability – Final Report 2015**

## **Student Research and Study Stay at UBC, Vancouver**

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In fall 2015 I had the opportunity to spend 3 months for a research stay at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver in the context of the “University Alliance for Sustainability”. My aim was to build a bridge between my scientific background in ecology and my interest in sustainability in general. Apparently, UBC enjoys in both fields international reputation. Further, I planned on visiting various sustainability organizations and initiatives on campus to foster my knowledge of education for sustainable development.

### **Course, seminar, talks**

At the beginning of my stay it was kind of challenging to attend any graduate course that I thought would be beneficial, even as a guest-auditor. Unfortunately, it was tough to find any application-oriented lab-course which I was interested in with regards to my applied skills. I assume that it will be more advantageous to start with a research stay at UBC really at the beginning of each term to maximize the chance of enrollment in a lab course. Anyway, it was possible to attend the Seminar Series by the Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability (IRES) as well as an outstanding undergraduate course. The IRES Seminar Series is roughly organized in two main sections that changed every other week. Besides seminars on professional development, they invited international guests who gave lectures on e.g. how Minatama shifted from a polluted Japanese city to an environmental model city. For me as a biologist, I really enjoyed the lecture given by a prominent expert on conservation. Hugh Possingham, famous for the conservation planning software Marxan that was used to underpin the rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef, explained how easy it could be to evaluate the cost effectiveness for securing of different threatened species. Also the professional development seminars were highly useful to me, as here a panel with environmental consultants was organized or two IRES professors gave talks on benefits and challenges of interdisciplinary research and publications. However, most valuable for me with regard to my main aim was an undergraduate course given by my supervisor Kai Chan on “Ecological Dimensions of Sustainability”. It was not only the critical presentation of the interacting roles of numerous sustainability initiatives in relation to their scientific basis, with a focus on biological conservation, ecosystem services/ecosystem-based management or corporate social/environmental responsibility and product certification systems. What really impressed me was the way of learning: students could work on team-based experiential learning activities and assignments, they made an effort to emphasize the complex nature of the problems to dealing with understanding and communicating them to non-scientists. For example they should record novel ideas about the intersection of natural science and sustainability from a perspective as an ecology ambassadors. Finally, students had to work in teams on a proposed actionable solution for better inclusion of ecology in sustainability decision-making or policy/management. This particular course has strengthen my impression

that policy and/or practice should shift considerably to better align with science, and that UBC is indeed “A Place of Mind”.

As a student from Europe it was also interesting to see North America from another perspective. Based on different histories of settlement and culture I was astonished how necessary and beneficial it is to fundamentally integrate and consolidate First Nations in ecological conservation and environmental impact assessment. Further, we could learn from their trading and sharing ethos for food sovereignty or that the traditional Inuit culture in the Arctic is experiencing the effects of climate change first, hence this culture is threatened by recent social and cultural changes. Besides talks of First Nations, I was able to listen to inspiring talks of prominent American scholars and intellectuals on the dimensions of inequality organized by the Lind Initiative. With my training in natural science I was grateful for the refreshing input into economy and politics. Especially the weeks before and after the Canadian federal election took place were so intense and motivating for many people that you could feel the spirit of the after-Harper era. I had the opportunity to listen to a leading thinker on inequality and Nobel-prize winner, Joseph Stiglitz, who presented some truly concerning data: almost all advanced OECD countries have seen increased inequality in the last 30 years. Furthermore, I learned that inequality for society strongly depends on your opportunities, expressed by intergenerational earnings mobility. He clearly disproved the myth of USA as “land of opportunity” as data shows that USA (and Great Britain) have low levels of earnings mobility between parents and their children. Though, Stiglitz gave an optimistic outlook: like the Scandinavian countries, you can move if you make the right political choices and change the policies. Nevertheless, most inspiring and motivating to me was the talk given by Elisabeth May 20 days before the Climate Change Conference in Paris. She is the leader of the underrepresented Green Party of Canada and will be in Paris for COP21. May enunciate it: COP21 negotiations are really the last chance to have a treaty that avoids levels of climate crisis. As Stiglitz, May explained the problem of intergenerational inequality with respect to environmental issues, what exemplifies the fundamental idea of sustainability. What owes our generation to future generations? Interestingly, she pointed out that especially young people, such as the students sitting in her audience, will be the next ones for taking action and have to be courageous. We, as the student body, are suffering now from mistakes that were made by an older generation decades ago and now it’s our time to make a difference based on lessons-learned so far. After that particular talk I felt so incredibly inspired and motivated with a touch of confidence. Hence, I was convinced that leading thinkers, may they sit in the parliament, at UBC or be stakeholders, besides their training and choosing the right words they have to be charismatic to reach and sensitize the people.

### **Volunteering**

Speaking of leaders, at UBC the term “volunteering” gets a new facet to me. You can volunteer for various positions, such as coordinator or representative or classy for hands-on activities, in various associations, initiatives or societies. That is not only recognized to broaden your horizon or exchange new ideas and learn from each other. Based on the high quality of teaching and research at UBC, what makes UBC an intense competitive environment, volunteering is highly important for your future career. It’s openly communicated among the student body that volunteering is of course a great opportunity to develop leadership and/or

social skills, expand networks while develop deeper connections with faculty and staff, but most important of all it revalues your own resume. In my opinion, besides the intrinsic motivation to be engaged in a sustainable initiative and be some kind of a low level decision maker, the main reason why UBC students are so ambitious with volunteering, alongside with their studies, is that those students are indeed better prepared for their future employment. As a result UBC establishes since 20 years a web of diverse and successful student initiatives in the field of sustainability. This strategy of a world-renowned university could hence build a scientific basis for Vancouver Greenest City 2020 Action Plan. For example, the corporate entity and political body of Metro Vancouver recruits UBC students for suitable positions in multiple fields, such as park operations, water and waste management or aboriginal relation programs. However, due to that development, one negative side effect culminates in a 6 month waiting list, if you are interested in one particular volunteer-position.

Both with their own initiative as a critical voice of UBC operations and policies and through funding of student projects and ideas, SEC (Student Environmental Centre) is the great resource for students to raise campus-wide awareness for environmental and sustainability issues. For example, they support discussions promoted by Amnesty International UBC on Shells activities in the Niger Delta or various events organized by UBC Students for Climate Action, such as conferences or collaborative painting projects. In addition, SEC is also funding permanent volunteer labor projects, such as the Sprouts Café with its organic, local and fair-trade foods or the Free Store with its free goods and services. Anyway, due to the established sustainability strategy at UBC, when you're on campus you get easily confused by the massive amount of sustainability organizations, initiatives and projects.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, my research stay at UBC in fall 2015 was an amazing experience. I'm so glad that I got the opportunity to witness an advanced sustainability strategy in general, to broaden my knowledge about global issues, such as development and climate change or to recognize the massive value of collaborating with First Nations. Besides that, I was able to notice the differences of teaching and research between German and Canadian universities and to adopt particular strategies of initiatives. For me, there is no question that the magnificent scene around UBC respective Vancouver functions as a great driver to engage yourself in sustainability and nature conservation.