

Final Report: Research and Study Stay at University of British Columbia (UBC)

Jakob Michelmann

Free University Berlin (FUB)

Master Course Futures Studies/ 4th Semester

May – July 2017 / 3 months

The University Alliance for Sustainability granted me with a scholarship for a 3-month research and study stay at the University of British Columbia (UBC). Since I wanted to write my master thesis on the future of plastic consumption, I was glad to find support from the UAS program sending me out to UBC with its excellent research environment for sustainability research projects. During the period I set myself the goal to do the greater part of the analytical steps for my master thesis.

Arrival

I have arrived in the first term of the summer session to stay throughout the middle of term 2. Wendy Kang supervised my stay administratively very well. She not only registered me for courses but handled difficulties with the obligatory health insurance and U-Pass (the equivalent for the semester ticket at Free University Berlin). The latter is not available for incoming students for the summer term due to financial regulations and funding structure for the research stay programs in general at UBC. Detailed information concerning administrative issues of students planning their stay through the summer may be available at the international office of FUB and by the UAS office at FUB.

Research and Study Stay

Studying at UBC gave me the great opportunity to edge my thesis with a very helpful supervisor, Kurt Hübner. With his background in economy and policy he recommended me to look at new path developments in the field of plastic consumption from both, the socio-technological perspective with Geels as I planned but also from an industrial, economical point of view with Perez to see if small niche developments could transform industrial paradigms potentially. We also discussed the opportunity to look at promoters of innovation with strong influence within their social network. I will focus my work more on this pathway. Surely, this will be challenging but feasible.

Most of my work for the environmental analysis (STEEP-analysis) was desk research in the libraries at UBC with great access to North American and international online-libraries. I was able to finish the STEEP-analysis as well as the interdependency analysis of factors which provides input for a scenario analysis in terms of which factors are affecting others actively, while others remain passive. But since I was in the city that is striving to be the greenest city in North America by 2020, I was eager to go into the field to observe plastic consumption behaviour, research on political initiatives, e.g. the single-use-item-strategy, and interview people about how they deal with plastic and recycling practices. Though, recycling is much stricter in terms of division of goods and hence, many people try to reuse plastics as many times they can, the opposite, i.e. bulk shopping, use of one-way coffee mugs are obviously part

of the daily life. However, Vancouver has been more innovative in energy, transportation and building projects compared to other “modern” cities. By contrast to the city’s efforts, UBC is pioneering in labs (e.g. the CHAN-lab, Center for Interactive Research on Sustainability), how people can be educated (e.g. by gamification) to change towards environmentally friendly behaviour. In the real (campus) world, many communication campaigns made UBC students aware of recycling plus saving energy and water successfully.

Through the summer session, the UBC campus is much less crowded. While many students work, conduct field placements or do internships, only a few students stay on campus. But it is the time, when graduate students finish their thesis’ in a calm environment without the need of waiting to find a free seat in the library or the cafeteria for lunch as I was told. The lower number of students on campus during the summer sessions is reflected in the course catalogue as well, offering much less courses compared to the winter sessions. The courses were usually held at morning or at night from 6pm until 10pm. This way, I was able to work on my thesis during the day and to attend courses complementing my research activities at night. I was happy to find two undergraduate courses at UBC with excellent teaching staff. I attended a philosophy course in term 2 of the summer session (230 Introduction to Ethics). Though, I had ethics in my syllabus at my home university I used the course to broaden my understanding of political choice in regulating or incentivizing consumer actions based on ethical decision making. Throughout term 1 and term 2 I took part in an intensive sociology course (101 Introduction to Sociology). The course held by Christopher MacKenzie turned out to be the missing piece for my master course in future studies and thesis right from the start. Through the course work of classical and latest literature and discussions I gained a much deeper understanding of entwined social forces reaching from family, education, work, technology, consumption, media, globalisation to environment, living (urbanisation) and policy. The interdependency analysis for my thesis is exactly all about finding the knots between the driving forces to construct scenarios. Professor MacKenzie complemented the work of my supervisor Professor Hübner deliberately. He took extra time and consideration through many talks after the course and emails to sharpen my research project or recommend latest literature. He also helped me to change perspective which was always helpful after a longer period of work.

Observing people in the field in Canada made it obvious to me that the term ‘sustainability’ became a very socially powerful but bendable concept. Used in many campaigns it can mobilize people for the greater good while the action itself might not cause positive outcome. To me it seems necessary that we ask ourselves, if our actions do get down to the root of the trouble or if we just silence our conscious whenever we act for projects, buy, recycle, etc. things that have the product imprint ‘sustainable’ for on it.

Conclusion

I am very glad, I was given the opportunity to study at UBC in the department of sociology and political science within the UAS program. My work benefitted from the input of teachers, the courses but also the field placements a lot. I am looking forward to finish my thesis back at FUB with the results.



Coming back with the experience of three months at UBC has not only broadened my knowledge. The joy, trust and friendliness of the staff, co-working students and Vancouverites presented to me, is what I want to sustain socially.