

The Tel Aviv University Academic Forum for Sustainability Sciences (TAFSS)

1. BACKGROUND

The Tel Aviv University Academic Forum for Sustainability Sciences (TAFSS) is an active forum of researchers and Ph.D. students from various disciplines and departments at Tel Aviv University (TAU). TAFSS emerged from a series of inter-facultative roundtable meetings addressing and questioning what a "sustainable society" means. TAFSS was established in April 2013 in association with The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) call at the Rio +20 Summit:

"The leaders of the international academic community are called upon to commit to the development of sustainable practices for Higher Education Institutions".

(The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012)

2. OBJECTIVES

The Forum aims to promote three main objectives:

- 1. **Exploration of sustainability** through multi/inter/trans-disciplinary collaborative academic research.
- 2. **Multidisciplinary ongoing dialogue** and exploration of the meaning of a "Sustainable Academy".
- 3. **Promotion and development** of practices for sustainable research.

3. REALIZATION

- 1. **Twelve interdisciplinary meetings** devoted to various topics were held by the Forum between April 2013 and April 2016. More than 40 lecturers spoke in these gatherings so far, with participant numbers ranging from 7 to 32 in each meeting, an active and present audience. The first few meetings were research-oriented, designed to establish a setting of sustainable learning. Afterwards, TAFSS meetings were open to the public.
- 2. **Each meeting comprises three main parts:** first, guidelines for open multidisciplinary spaces are presented; then a series of 4-6 short presentations are given, addressing the subject defined for the meeting from different disciplines or different positions in the topic's ecosystem; the third and essential part of the meeting is the open and vibrant discussion, which, in addition to sharing information, aims to develop and improve our interdisciplinary dialogue skills.
- 3. **The mailing list** serves us between meetings to share relevant information, ideas and links to external events or occurrences.
- 4. **"Sustainable communities"** is the first sustainable research project that has emerged from the Forum in May 2016, in an endeavor which is still ongoing, conducted by a group of four researchers from the faculties of social work, engineering, environment, geography and management. This group aims to articulate local knowledge on "sustainable communities", by means of a 24-chapter book featuring innovative case studies and theories. The book will be open and accessible free of charge to anyone wishing to engage in its contents.
- 5. **A second research project** is now forming, intended to start in Spring 2017, led by a group of seven Forum affiliated researchers and evolving around major sustainability themes.
- 6. **"Sustainable World"**- a new project starting this semester, based on collaboration with The Unit for Social Involvement at TAU. We will guide 4 undergraduate students who will volunteer and collect data on similar initiatives and relevant activities around the world.

4. KEY CHALLENGES

- Initiative**
- 1. **Grow from bottom up** and is still in its informal stage.
 - 2. **TAFSS is based on voluntary activities** on the internal motivation of researchers.
 - 3. **Lack of resources**, limits the ability to produce, preserve and distribute new knowledge .
 - 4. **Fluid, informal and abstract configuration**, which is different from the formal and hierarchical structure of the university.
 - 5. **Difficulty to raise resources** for multidisciplinary sustainable research teams.
 - 6. **What will ensure the TAFSS sustainability** (existence and practices) in the long run?
- System**
- 1. **TAFSS takes place in an interdisciplinary informal space**, in that sense, TAFSS does not "belong" to any specific faculty or benefits from. any continuous support in terms of resources or formal commitments.
 - 2. **TAFSS activities meet the constraints of the system** in which it takes place, including the difficulty of the university itself to adopt sustainable practices, or to promote innovative sustainability initiatives – "The unsustainable side".
- Researchers**
- 1. **Researchers** who take part in TAFSS are expected to have the following characteristics: be able to reside in realms of not knowing, speaking different scientific languages, being used to different professional norms, and having to practice a great deal of mutual respect and patience towards each other.
 - 2. **An absence of extrinsic rewards**
 - 3. **Only a few young researchers joined the forum**, since that activity is perceived as delaying the race for tenure.
- Leadership**
- 1. **The forum is led and coordinated by a doctoral student**
 - 2. **Requires a large investment of time and effort**
 - 3. **What is sustainability leadership?** who are the leaders? what kind of leadership is needed now for the sustainable future of the Forum?

5. LESSONS LEARNT AND SUCCESS FACTORS

- 1. **The challenges** TAFSS faces deepen our knowledge of the complexity inherent in promoting sustainable research, especially in a large university.
- 2. **The wisdom of slowing down** – TAFSS consciously took a step back from the race of interdisciplinary research writing, in order to practice a multidisciplinary language and directly experience the meanings of joining an interdisciplinary space for research oriented discourse. This step led us to new routers: For example we developed a practice for communication within interdisciplinary meetings.
- 3. **The strength of the weakness** – Fluid and informal configuration, a lack of resources, etc.
- 4. **Collaborations and steering groups** as a basis for decision-making and activities along the way.
- 5. **Persistence and adaptability to changes** – Ongoing learning and willingness to change.
- 6. **The human element** – the people beyond the formal structure pave the way and keep the dream.
- 7. **Appreciation**
- 8. **Multidisciplinary ongoing dialogue** – exploration of the meaning of "Sustainable Academy" as much as "Unsustainable Academy"
- 9. **Various ways to participate** – interests, abilities and willingness to be involved.
- 10. **TFASS story** – this is our story, the people and the system.

The Forum as described above creates a unique path of interdisciplinary collaborative research methods, focusing on sustainability sciences and developing new research practices; in these capacities, we consider the Forum and our experiences in its establishment and continued activity to be valuable sources of vital knowledge for similar and future local as well as international and global initiatives.

