

Things we don't normally do at universities

Sitting in Pandora's foyer, waiting for the afternoon session 'Making collaborative projects for radical innovation work' to begin, it is hard not to think of the myth of Pandora and her box. Out of our innate human curiosity we start experimenting on a small-scale. This might lead to bigger projects with sometimes unexpected and unwanted side-effect. Then we want to make amends, reverse time as it were, to how things were before. But we cannot undo our actions – the same as Pandora. The myth of Pandora helps us to understand something essential about being human.

Exploring 'things we don't normally do at universities'

Back to the afternoon session, in which we explore what kind of collaboration across disciplines and with multiple stakeholders might lead us on the path to sustainability. We need more than scientific expertise and money alone; we need *pervasive ideas* to change politics and behavioral patterns. Out of transdisciplinary and 'unusual' collaborations between scholars and other stakeholders, promising ideas might grow into signature projects.

The PICS way

As a demonstration of what is possible, Sibyl Seitzinger from the Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions* explains to us – on screen from Vancouver – 'the PICS way', wherein the *use* of climate solutions by policymakers forms integral part of the scientists mandate. From the start of a project, 'solution seekers' (e.g. local governments, First Nations or conservation organisations) work closely together with researchers. A PICS staff member guides both parties through the process of identifying and solving problems. And from the beginning, the impact of the project is documented.

First Nations and scientists team up

The PICS approach seems geared toward larger, more professional organizations, not grassroots citizen groups or cooperatives. Someone asks if the 'solution seekers' are not representatives of already dominant views which might be consolidated this way – referring to Mariana Mazzucato's earlier warning of "putting bandages on what is already broken".

The collaboration with First Nations is very interesting – it is easy to imagine that scientific and indigenous views on sustainability, put together, will lead to fruitful insights and new ideas. But in other countries, like the Netherlands, this kind of intimate knowledge of locally sustainable systems has not really survived and exists only in memory. Here the stories exemplifying how we should lead sustainable lives – equally important as the science and politics of sustainability – have to be rediscovered or reinvented.

From PICS to Pathways

Seitzinger, who is also member of the Pathways to Sustainability Advisory Board, sees similarities between Pathways and PICS. Ultimately they grow out of a sense of responsibility and commitment to change that comes with the privileged position of university. The second part of the afternoon session focuses on the way ahead for the Pathways programme in the coming years. Are we ready for the collaborations across disciplines and involving multiple stakeholders that are necessary to deliver on the desired scientific breakthroughs, educational innovations and societal impact?

Crossing the divide – ‘everyone professor’

Peter Pelzer and Erik van Sebille (both member of Utrecht Young Academy*) try to think across boundaries that traditionally intersect the university community – not only disciplinary boundaries, but also boundaries between scientific and support staff and between university and society. They speak of ‘flipped academia’, not to mention the bold statement ‘everyone professor’.

Trying to make sense of it all, the writer of this blog browses the internet and comes across the theater show ‘Mindlab’*. This performance, visited by many university employees last year, seems highly relevant to academia’s struggle with itself and its role in society. A good example of how story-telling and theater are important in connecting science with economics and politics – forging three separate ‘worlds’ into one. As an example of academia reinventing itself, Peter mentions the Centre for Unusual Collaborations* – a route worth exploring it seems.

Democratising academia – how far do you go?

What academics above all need is breathing space and spare time to explore new paths, says Erik. The ‘Twenty Percent Project’, allowing employees time to pursue personal projects, might be worthwhile to follow. The participants agree and even react: why not more than twenty percent! Someone else wonders if ‘everyone professor’ shouldn’t be extended beyond the university as well. After all, there are more people we can learn from – Canada’s First Nations come to mind.

Some discussion follows about the need for ‘democratising’ academia, but at the same time maintaining scientific standards – the same ambivalence that can be heard around the standard of peer-reviewed science: we should be less obsessed with it, but not throw it overboard. Utrecht University’s new vision on Recognition and Rewards* is mentioned as a step in the right direction.

Towards a climate fostering new collaborations

After the thought-provoking Young Academics’ view on and how to break out of the university’s ‘bubble’ and connect with the world outside, in a hands-on exercise the participants are invited to reflect on what they think are the preconditions necessary to make unusual and transdisciplinary collaborations possible. What do scholars need? What should be changed in academia?

One thought is that more ‘free’ time and/or independence for scientists might work out fine, but at the same time scientists (and support staff) need a clear direction to work towards. Efforts should not be fragmented into too many small, ‘personal’ projects, but form part of one vision and strategy. Another thought is to ‘stimulate serendipity’ – a good find, but also a contradiction in terms. Some things can’t be forced. Really essential seems to be the notion of ‘shared understanding, common language’. Since we’re working on a new interdisciplinary scientific paradigm, we have to talk about the meaning of old and new concepts and theories – if only to know where we *disagree***.

* For more information :

- [Pacific Institute for Climate Solutions](#)
- [Utrecht Young Academy](#)
- [Mindlab](#)
- [Centre for Unusual Collaborations](#)
- [Recognition and Rewards](#)

** See for example the interesting [Travelling Concepts podcast series](#) (nr 3 is on ‘Sustainability’)