WWF vision for a sustainable university

The visionary sustainable Swiss university is a pioneering institution, embodying cutting-edge approaches to sustainability across its five key areas. It is not merely a place of learning but a living system where sustainability principles are woven into every action, decision, and interaction. Here's how this university manifests its vision across its five areas:

Teaching

Teaching is grounded in the concept of transformative learning, where students are not only educated but challenged to rethink their assumptions and values about the world. Sustainability is integrated across every discipline, from engineering to the arts, creating a deeply interdisciplinary environment. Students learn systems thinking and are encouraged to approach complex global challenges through a holistic lens. Active, participatory teaching methods would dominate, with a strong focus on project-based learning and experimentation. Therefore, courses often revolve around real-world projects in partnership with local communities, businesses, or NGOs, blending theory with practice. The curriculum is not static but dynamic, evolving with the needs of society, and students are empowered to co-create learning pathways through social innovation labs, where they design solutions to contemporary sustainability issues.

Research

The university leads the way in mission-oriented research, targeting global challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and social inequality. Research is heavily collaborative and driven by the impact it can have on society, rather than just academic advancement. Multidisciplinary research hubs focus on bridging the gap between scientific knowledge and its application, drawing from both the natural and social sciences. Partnerships with governments, private industry, and civil society are integral, ensuring that findings directly influence policy and practice. Research results would be disseminated widely, not only through academic publications, but also via open platforms accessible to all. Open and citizen science would be encouraged, enabling society to participate actively in the co-creation of sustainable knowledge, aligning with the broader goals of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Services and Transfer to Society

A core mission of the university is impact through transfer to society, where the knowledge, innovations, and solutions developed within the institution actively contribute to societal transformation. This is achieved through a robust knowledge transfer ecosystem, which includes start-up incubators for sustainability-focused businesses, community workshops, and ongoing education for professionals. The university serves as a convener for dialogue on sustainability, hosting global and local forums that bring together diverse stakeholders to collaborate on solutions. In this model, the university is both a hub for innovation and a facilitator of change, continually adapting its services to the evolving needs of the community and wider society.

Governance

Governance at the visionary university is based on participatory democracy. Decision-making is inclusive, with students, faculty, staff, and external stakeholders actively involved in shaping the university's strategic direction. The university adopts experimental structures akin to "citizen councils", ensuring that decision-making processes include voices beyond those in formal leadership positions. This participative culture is deeply aligned with theories of governance for the common good, ensuring that every voice is heard and that all actions are in harmony with long-term ecological and social well-being. The organizational structure is fluid, allowing for agility and rapid adaptation to emerging sustainability challenges. Leaders within the university see themselves as stewards, responsible not just for the institution's success, but for its role as a driver of systemic change. To encourage bottom-up engagement, especially on matters where academic freedom is critical, the university sets up commissions or collaborative bodies where all stakeholders can co-develop projects and influence decisions, ensuring that diverse perspectives are integrated, and that innovation and academic autonomy thrive together.

Operations and campus

The campus itself is a regenerative space, following the principles of Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics. This means that the university operates within the planet's ecological boundaries, with zero carbon emissions and a closed-loop system for energy, water, and waste. The campus is a showcase of circular economy in action, where all materials used are either reused, repurposed, or composted. Solar panels, geothermal energy, and green roofs are omnipresent, while the biodiversity on campus is actively fostered with native plant species, urban farms, and permaculture gardens that feed both the community and contribute to local ecosystems. The campus is also a living lab, where students and researchers continuously test and implement new sustainability innovations. By prioritizing sustainable procurement, the university ensures that all goods and services sourced have minimal environmental impact, support ethical labor practices, and contribute to a circular economy. To increase its positive impact beyond its direct sphere, the university uses its investments as leverage to maximize its sustainable impact, adopting impact investing practices that direct funds towards projects and companies that contribute to environmental and social goals. In addition, strict control of third-party funds is in place to ensure that all capital managed or associated with the university complies with strict sustainability criteria, reinforcing its role as a leader in responsible finance and the sustainable economy. In terms of sustainable mobility, the university promotes car-free zones, bike-sharing, and charging stations on campus, while encouraging public transport and carpooling off-campus. Implementing a CO2 budget limits air travel, pushing for more virtual meetings and local collaborations to cut emissions from flights. In terms of sustainable catering, it actively promotes plant-based meals and sources local, seasonal and organic produce, which significantly reduces emissions. It incorporates composting and food waste tracking systems to reduce waste, while eliminating single-use plastics in favor of biodegradable materials, thus minimizing its overall environmental impact. In the digital realm, the university actively reduces its ecological footprint, recognizing the reliance on rare resources often extracted under unsustainable and unethical conditions. It optimizes data storage, utilizes energy-efficient servers, and promotes responsible device use and recycling, addressing both environmental and social challenges tied to digital infrastructure.

WWF