

Dreaming together about sustainable education

The Higher Education Summit (hereafter HES) started as every conference starts: a cosy reception to already get to know the participants a bit. During this reception, the alderman for climate, environment and energy, circular economy, sustainable city and international solidarity, Nele Kelchtermans, came to give a brief explanation of the sustainable actions the City of Hasselt is taking. It was very interesting to hear what initiatives the city is taking to make its own operations but also the municipality more sustainable.

The first day I mainly followed sessions on making curricula and research at the university more sustainable. After very engaging keynote speakers and group sessions, it became very clear to me that changing curricula is not so obvious, contrary to what I first thought. I learnt that it is important to look at the way institutions work, social movements and the personal will of decision-makers to go against the existing structures.

It is not enough to add to the existing structures. A complete rethinking of the purpose of the courses being offered is needed. We need to look more at social and sustainable relevance instead of focusing on economic value. The same goes for publications and research, here too a shift is needed.

By sharing not only good practices, but also the stumbling blocks, we can work together on tomorrow's sustainable society. The impact of change can also be increased by inviting people who do not normally sit at the table. This gives you new perspectives and it is just those perspectives we need in transforming higher education.

On the second day, I was inspired by a very engaging session that explained a project that worked out a plan with the neighbourhood to transform a park back into a place to bring people together. This project is a collaboration between students and local residents, with support from the education team. The subject was added to the curriculum, making it a real part of the programme. Students from different faculties could register for this subject. I think these kinds of initiatives should have a more important place in the programmes. Not only do you learn a lot of practical skills from this, but you also build a network outside your faculty and perhaps learn something that would otherwise not have been covered in your programme. These are the courses where you can really get to work and prove what you learn most from and what sticks with you the most.

On the third and final day, we were taken on a trip to the Hoge Kempen National Park. Here we learnt more about the region and the conservation works being done in the park to protect our wildlife. We also visited ECOTRON, which is a research site of Hasselt University, where they study the impact of climate change by simulating different scenarios. As far as I am concerned, the perfect end to a congress on the theme of sustainability!