

Sustainability Matters Now, Episode Five Transcript

00:13

Welcome to the Sustainability Matters Now podcast. My name is Tom Ritchie and today I'm really pleased to be joined by Stéphanie Panichelli-Batalla, Professor in Global Sustainable Development and Academic Director for Sustainability at the University of Warwick. Stephanie oversees the implementation and development of Warwick's sustainability strategy.

She chairs the sustainability committee and is leading the launch of Warwick's new sustainability strategy, alongside introducing the university's first ever sustainability induction for all new staff and students.

00:42

Her work brings together different disciplines, departments and professional services around sustainability, connecting institutional governance with campus operations, research excellence and educational practice. Stephanie, hello. Hello. How are doing? I'm fine. How are you, Tom? Yeah, I'm not too bad. Thank you. I wonder, Stephanie, what brings you to this conversation on sustainability, please? I should start with the five I was born in Belgium, a country where...

01:07

When I was a child, we already were talking very much about recycling and environment and how we should care for our planet. I have grown up with that, and it has always mattered to me. And then of course, you go to university and my research has always focused on human rights and social justice. So, I've always rather be attracted from a research point of view to the social aspect of sustainability. And this is what brought me to global sustainable development. in 2017,

01:33

I moved from Aston University to Warwick University. I left a languages department to move to a global sustainable development department, which was something quite exciting, innovative in the country. And that brought all of this together, my passion for the environment, and then for social sustainability. I was then asked to take on the role of head of school, across faculty studies where that degree was hosted. Did that for five years. And that brought me into conversations at university level around education for sustainable development.

02:03

So how could we embed sustainability in our degrees, embed skills, the sustainable skills for students to make them the graduates we wanted them to be, to be those change makers when they would leave Warwick. And then two years ago, I applied for a new role that was created, the one that you just mentioned before. So, the academic director for sustainability role. And I started in May 2024, I believe

02:28

As you said, this is a brand-new role. It's a role that is about strategy, that is about leadership, leading change and leading on sustainability strategy of the university. So, it's for me a very exciting opportunity, an opportunity where I can see the impact of what I do, but also what I do with the people that I work with and with our students. And I can't wait to continue working in this space. Thank you. And it's really great to hear about your story. And I'm always struck by when I speak to people on this podcast.

02:57

Everyone always refers to something in childhood that has given them that bug for sustainability, whether it's recycling or whether in your case, it's more of the social sustainability side of things. I think we all have those stories that we can look back to that kind of drove us towards this discussion around sustainability. I wonder, could you tell us a bit more about your role and what that kind of involves day to day for you as well, please?

03:18

I think to start with it's important to clarify that at Warwick the sustainability leadership and oversight work is divided into two areas. So, we have first the estates team where there is a director for environmental sustainability and infrastructure who is supported by our excellent sustainability and energy team. So, their work very much focuses on the operational side of our sustainability work, and I work very closely with them of course.

03:46

And there is my role, which is the academic director. And so, the remit is rather on education and research and then of course also on engagement, how Warwick engages with our local and regional community, but also with external stakeholders around the topic or the area of sustainability. So that's very much my role. As you can imagine, it links very closely with what the state's team is doing, but it is slightly different. I act as a bridge between the operations team.

04:14

and the rest of the university. So, I work, as I said, closely with the team and also closely with the three faculties across the universities and with our students. And I make sure that those connections are facilitated in some way, because sometimes it is a little bit difficult to join or to connect those two worlds. I also see myself as a problem solver or as a facilitator when someone has been trying to do something and for some reason it just never managed to find the right person to support them.

04:41

I feel that I'm kind of a champion for them. And so, if I can, I will help them get that project that is driven by passion and commitment to sustainability, to achievement. I also think that it's about being a voice amplifier. So how can I give visibility to what's happening across campus? And then also a network establisher.

05:06

Sometimes you have two people working on very similar projects, but they just don't know that they are, or you have a project happening in operations and research are working on something exactly around that, but they're not connected. And I feel my role is to connect to those. So, to go back to your question and what does my work look like day to day? It can differ from one day to another. There's never two days that are the same. So, I think looking back at the past 18 months, I need to think of what the two main priorities were of

05:35

of those two first years, let's say. And as this was a new role, I kind of had to shape it. So, I thought, you when thinking back about that, well, the first one would be telling our story. We didn't have a story at Warwick about what is sustainability story at Warwick? What is the story that we want to tell? What are our strengths? What are we doing? So, I've spent a lot of time talking to people, trying to understand what is happening across this huge campus with all these students and all these staff and

06:02

being able to then put that all in one place and collate that information. And you know very much because you've been supporting me in that space, but we tried to tell that story now in our new environmental sustainability web pages. So, if you haven't seen them, I would highly recommend having a look. And the other area that my focus has been on is around what you mentioned before, the refreshment of our sustainability strategy. So of course that meant a lot of strategic work, a lot of analysis, a lot of benchmarking.

06:29

And then lot of future thinking, where could we be within three to five years? Where do we want to be and where could we be? So very varied types of days, never the same day and talking to a lot of people to understand what's happening, but also to get people on board in this sustainability journey. I think it's great to hear that you have those interactions across the university from students to operations teams to research and education. And in the spaces

that you and I have worked together, I can attest that you're very good at bringing disparate people together who wouldn't otherwise know each other.

06:59

to work on things and achieve things. And a big shout out to Euron, who may or may not be listening, but she and I have been put together by you to work on various different projects and Euron works in the environmental sustainability team. And we would never have met. yet together we've done a lot of work on telling this story, as you say, through sustainability case studies and through the environmental sustainability website of which Euron gets all of that credit because she did some amazing work there. But with that said, Warwick is launching a new sustainability strategy, as you mentioned.

07:28

You've seen the process from beginning to end. What's different about this strategy and what's prompted you to lead its development now? Again, very good questions. I'll start with the last part maybe of the question is why now? When I started, we were two years into our previous strategy, which was called at the time, the way to sustainable. That was the first university sustainability strategy. And of course, no strategy is perfect and it had its flaws, but it was a great way to start.

07:57

When I started, I was asked to start looking back at that strategy and see whether it needs refreshing because of course we were then coming to the third year of that strategy. And it did for many reasons. And I would say the key difference, if you're asking me, it was different between the two, is that we decided to narrow the focus. So, the first strategy was a sustainability strategy. It was trying to do everything, right? So, it was looking at sustainability. So, I pointed to the three pillars of social environment and economic pillar.

08:27

In this case, we said, look, this is too much. also, because the fact that the work sustainability can be quite confusing, and people think that sustainability is just about environmental sustainability. We said, look, let's focus to start with on environmental sustainability and we're going to call this strategy an environmental sustainability strategy. So, there is no confusion about that. So, I think that's the first main difference.

08:51

Then what else would I say? think what is worth highlighting is that for us, this refresh strategy was really an opportunity to look back. Where are we at today? How have things evolved since we launched our first sustainability strategy? And in some areas, we made a huge amount of progress. And so, it was time to review our targets because so much progress had been made. In other areas, we weren't as advanced. So, we needed to ask ourselves, why were we not as advanced? that is...

09:20

huge amount of the work that we did, despite the fact that we were doing a lot of things in those areas, but we just didn't manage to really record or measure progress in those areas. So, it was also an important thing for us to identify the gaps of the previous strategy. For example, and that's again linked to the current context, right? Things changed very quickly. But in our previous strategy, for example, we had nothing on circular economy. Why circular economy now has really become one of our priorities.

09:46

So, it has its place in the new strategy. We have a circular economy action group, and we have colleagues working specifically on circular economy. We also had nothing on digital and now with the explosion of AI, we cannot not consider the environment sustainability impact of AI. So, we need to start having those conversations. Can we measure the impact of our AI use and the fact that the society is pushing us to use AI? And of course there are very good things about AIs, right?

10:16

But we tend to think about the ethical impact, not that much about the environmental impact. So, these are the things that we decided, we noticed we had gaps in our current strategy or the previous strategy. One of the areas where we needed to also make progress was with data collection. So, for some areas we were excellent at having a lot of data and we were reporting on those areas, and we could really show progress. And sometimes this goes into the fact that we had to report about those areas for external reasons.

10:46

In other areas, we had no data. And that was either because we just had no measurement system in place or because we didn't have the accurate platforms to measure data or to collect data. So, we've been working a lot around that and that takes time. So, I'm not telling you that in June this year, I will be able to tell you how many modules we have that teach about sustainability or that have embedded sustainability skills in their modules. But we now have a plan in place, and we will be able to tell that story and to

11:15

to identify which areas of university, need potentially a little bit more support. So, there's a lot happening in that space with the new strategy. And then of course, there's the area of governance. We now have a better governance system. As part of the strategy, we also have governance objectives and targets, and that includes transparency and reporting. So, we want to be able to tell our colleagues, our students, our community, this is what we're doing in this space. This is the difference that we're making and that we are walking the talk.

11:44

that we're not just saying that we're doing things, but we can show that we're making progress and that we're making impact. Yeah. And I think it's great to hear the steps that you've taken to telling that story and being able to take people with you on that sustainability journey. And I think this podcast is another way of just telling these stories of what's happening at Warwick and also what's happening beyond as well. And you mentioned about governance as part of your answer there and how you've been working to build the governance across the institution. And I think...

12:10

Governance can be a word that's particularly difficult to connect with for some people, particularly if their interest is in a very specific area, in this case, in sustainability. As I mentioned, you're chair of the sustainability committee. How does governance work when you're trying to coordinate sustainability across such a large and as you said, complex institution like Warwick? Yes, it's a good question. It's, think, one of the many challenges of this role.

12:37

The good thing that we have at Warwick is that we have made progress in the governance space. So, before I took on the role, what we had for sustainability was an action group. It was the environmental and social sustainability action group. It was a group of motivated people with a former provost on that group supporting the agenda because she was a huge sustainability champion, but it wasn't part of the formal governance of the university. So since then.

13:06

We now have a sustainability committee, as you said, and that sustainability committee is part of the formal governance of the university. And that helps because once it is, then there are minutes attached to a meeting, there are actions attached to a meeting, and there are expectations of follow-up of actions. There's also reporting systems. So, we have the sustainability committee, for example, has a dotted line to council, to senate, and to the university executive board. So that ensures

13:35

that those key committees are aware and supportive of what we're working on, which in the past potentially was not the case. So that's, think, really important to understand. The fact that it's part of the formal governance of the

university supports our agenda. But as you said, it's a complex institution. And one of the challenges of sustainability is that it covers everything. It covers research, it covers education, it covers operations.

14:05

It's about students, it's about academic staff, it's about professional services staff. You need to get everyone on board. You need for everyone to be aware of what you're doing. Our committee have meetings take place four times a year for two hours. So, you can imagine that's quite limited time to be able to tackle everything that we want to do or to discuss everything as we would like to do.

14:27

So, the way we've done this is that we have a set of action groups and those action groups have been set up based on our strategic priorities in our new strategy, but we're also flexible with those action groups. So, for example, we have identified priorities like, as I said, circular economy, but we now have a circular economy action group. have a lack of work happening around sustainability policy and reporting. So, we have an action group that works on that. But then we also have action groups that are

14:55

being created as they come because the need appears to have an action group working on. And if it's on the specific topic that might not last forever, then it becomes a working group. But we will have new action groups coming up. And those action groups, this is where the discussions take place. So, we try to have the right people in those action groups so that they represent the community and they also have external communications. will have some time where alumni sitting on those action groups.

15:22

But they also represent our students. So, we have student representation on all our action groups because our students are our drivers. They are passionate and they will help us drive the sustainability agenda. We also have student representation on the Sustainability Committee, and I work very closely with the Student Union because this is one area where we are completely on the same page and we really want to work together to drive change.

15:46

To summarize, would say the role of the committee is very much to, of course, think to the strategy. So, monitor progress of the strategy. So, it receives reports about progress from all the different teams working on sustainability areas. And then it will potentially propose amendments to the strategies or to targets or objectives depending on changing circumstances. The committee would also approve initiatives or ideas or proposals that will come from action groups. And if need be, if they need further approval, the committee will take those.

16:15

to the next committee at the next level, whether that is the exec board or whether that is a state's team or whether that is teaching or research committee, et cetera, or council and senate. The committee would also decide on priorities. So, as I said, in the first two years of priority were visibility, narrative, and strategy refresh. Now we are looking at strategy implementation, progress monitoring of that strategy and having the right systems in place.

16:40

And we're starting a conversation now on social sustainability because as I said, we started with environmental sustainability. Now we're starting to move into the social sustainability space because there again, there's quite some work to do. And I say that finally, the committee, the role of the committee is very much to be a sustainability advocates with other committees. So, we will take items to other committees. As I said, we would also ensure that the sustainability question is being asked or thought about in the relevant committees.

17:09

So, it's quite complex, but at the same time, it's quite exciting because it is an opportunity to change what we're doing or the way we're doing things. And I think it's great to hear the different ways in which governance is shared

across the action groups and across the working groups that you've mentioned. And I think as someone who's involved in those, having that governance in place, although, as I mentioned in my question, that can be quite difficult to connect with sometimes. I've found that it gives a sense of accountability towards this work, but it also gives

17:39

almost permission to bring together people working in silos. And actually, it's giving people a point to aim towards when working around sustainability so that you can bring people from different departments together. You can bring students from different courses and the students union together as well. And from my point of view, gives permission to work in these ways and knowing that the route to get a new initiative working is to go through sustainability committee is really useful.

18:02

The action groups are a great space for people to get involved in if they want to be more involved with that. gives you a way of engaging with these specific topics, as you said, around policy and around circular economy and other topics as well. So, we want to be aware of all the passionate sustainability advocates in the university, but we will never have enough of them. So, if anyone listening to this podcast would like to be involved, please have a look at our governance pages on our sustainability web pages, because there are quite a number of action groups, as I said

18:31

New ones can be developed, if need be, but we're always looking for additional people to join us and to support us. And it can be either by joining an action group or it can be by being involved in a project linked to work happening in action groups, et cetera. So please don't hesitate to get in touch. There are our Resource and Account Sustainability at Warwick. It would be lovely to hear from you. And I think as well, part of that telling the story that we've been trying to work on.

18:55

has tried to come up with different ways for people to get engaged, whether it's as a green champion, whether it's joining an action group or almost anything in between. So almost regardless of the time that you have and the level that you'd like to aim at, you can be involved if you are passionate about sustainability. And something else I'd like to talk about as well is Warwick is just introducing a new sustainability induction for all new staff and students. And this is something the university hasn't had before.

19:20

What do you think this signals about Warwick's changing approach to sustainability moving forward? I think it highlights and confirms that Warwick is still considering sustainability as one of its strategic pillars. For me, what it signals is that despite the challenging context we're currently in in higher education in this country, despite the challenging geopolitical context we're experiencing, especially in the context again of sustainability,

19:50

We are still considering here at Warwick that sustainability is a priority. And we are saying that we take our role as an education provider and also one of the major employers of the region very seriously. Because we want as university to ensure that our students and our staff understand our commitment to this, but also the role that we all have to play to protect our planet and our future. I'm excited to see how that's received. And if that allows this kind of

20:20

simpler route in for people to get into sustainability as we mentioned in the previous question where we know that there are people very passionate, but perhaps aren't always sure the right way to engage with sustainability at work because we're all busy. We will have many different things that we have to work on. And it can be sometimes difficult to, I think, find your allies if you're in a department or if you're in a specific area where it doesn't feel like there are other people there. Whereas we know from the work that we've done that there are a number of people who are very, very keen.

20:48

And with all of that said, the last question I want to ask is what steps do you think we can take to ensure a more sustainable future, both at Warwick and beyond, please? Yes. uh It's good question. It's a difficult question, I think, especially in this specific context. So, I don't want to think too big. What I would like to say is I think the step we need to take is to make sure we continue doing what we're doing in advancing the research to tackle those sustainability challenges or in training or

21:18

our students to become those future leaders because they will be the future decision makers and they will decide what our future will look like and the future of their children. Right. And we need as an institution to also continue leading by example. So, for me, it's not really a step. It's just a request for continued commitment. And I think it's, it's hard in those times to not let sustainability fall through the cracks. It might not look as urgent to some.

21:47

as other crises that we're going through at the moment, but we're talking about our future and it's the decisions that we make today that will have an impact on tomorrow. So, I mean, the steps are really about continued commitment and not changing what we're doing despite the difficulties that we're experiencing today. And I think you've summed up really nicely of not seeing sustainability as a nice to have, but a must have. Exactly. Thank you, Stephanie. Amazing to chat to you and hear more about the new strategic plan, to hear more about the work that you've been doing over the last couple of years and the

22:17

the ways in which you're creating new avenues and new bridges for people to be able to join into sustainability at Warwick. We'll definitely have another conversation again, maybe in a year or two's time to see how that implementation has worked and the work you're doing on social sustainability as well. Thank you very much, Tom, for inviting me and allowing me to be part of this conversation. And thank you also for everything you're doing to support me in this journey, because there are so many things that I would not have been able to do without your support.

22:43

Look forward to speaking to you again very soon. So have a lovely rest of the day and I'll speak to you. Thank you. Bye bye. See you soon.