

Environmental, Ethical Trade, and Fair Trade Purchasing Policies: Some Challenges of Promoting Sustainability in Canadian Universities

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The social missions of universities are generally associated with their three core functions: teaching, research, and service. In undertaking these tasks, members of the university community have historically engaged in a variety of practices (e.g., boycotts and divestment) that have intentionally sought to address pressing issues of social justice (e.g., the feminist and civil rights movements and anti-apartheid activism).

As the notion of “sustainable development” came to prominence in the 1980s, it is not at all surprising that universities were considered potentially key to its promotion very early on. While universities have generally come to embrace this role publicly, critics have argued that they have not always backed up their stated commitments, much less committed themselves to measuring their impact on sustainability. This lack of commitment to (and reporting on) sustainability issues not only relates to the core functions of the university, but also its auxiliary activities, such as investment and procurement policies.

This chapter examines the latter topic. It does so by examining the discourse and practice relating to the adoption of sustainable purchasing policies. The reason for this approach is that while few universities have adopted explicit social accounting practices, a significant number have adopted (or have considered adopting) purchasing policies that include items that are typically considered under a social accounting framework. To the degree that the latter have hard standards, they potentially provide some account of impact on university procurement practices, depending, of course, on the degree to which the policies are effectively implemented. In this chapter, we draw upon survey data and follow-up interviews with university procurement managers. We investigate both the extent to which Canadian universities have adopted sustainable purchasing policies (including ethical trade and fair trade policies) and the reasons underlying their decision to do so (or not), along with the experiences that they have had in trying to implement such policies. The chapter concludes with key findings and directions for future research, including some discussion of the importance of universities adopting social accounting measures.

Introduction – Universities and Sustainability

The Discourse on Sustainability

Sustainable development and the more general idea of sustainability are highly contested concepts. For our purposes, three events linked to the emergence and rise to prominence of the notion of sustainable development are key to understanding the nature of the disputes in question.² The first of these was the publication of the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) in 1980 (IUCN, 1980). Based on a discourse dating back to the early 1970s, this publication was primarily responsible for introducing the concept of “sustainable development.” The second major event was the publication of the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). More commonly known as the Brundtland Report – after the head of the Commission, former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland – this document has provided the most widely cited definition of sustainable development: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED, 1987, p. 43). The third key development was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992. More commonly known as the Earth Summit or the Rio Summit – after the host city – this event was at the time the largest ever meeting of heads of states in the world. It gave unprecedented publicity to the issues of the environment and development and popularized the term “sustainable development” to such an extent that its use is now *de rigueur* among NGOs, governmental bodies, other public institutions, and even the private sector.

What is significant about these three different events for our concerns is the fact that they represent three very different approaches to sustainable development: a conservation-centred, equity-centred, and growth-centred approach respectively (Reed, 2002). Each of these models offers distinct understandings of the notions of sustainability and sustainable development, the extent of the current crisis and its causes, and the strategies that should be pursued and the actors who should have the prime responsibility for promoting sustainable development. In the case of the WCS, sustainability is conceived of in terms of the physical environment, with conservation and the “sustenance” of ecosystems being the goal. The roots of the dire current problems can be traced back to industrialization (and overconsumption), especially as countries in the South seek to imitate the development paths of the North. Governments and development agencies are primarily responsible for developing “conservation-centered” strategies (including small scale and subsistence projects that draw upon traditional knowledge) in which socio-economic development is subjugated to the primary goal of conservation (Adams, 1990).

For the WCED, by contrast, the notion of sustainable development is decidedly more human-centred, with a focus on equity in the current North–South relations as well as our relationship to future generations. The current developmental, environmental, and security crises are understood as a reflection of the failure of states to ensure a just distribution of the world’s resources; a resolution of the situation requires not an end to growth, but a redistribution in the rates of growth (and consumption) between North and South and structural change in the global economy, including more stringent international regulation. Finally, while there were sharply differing opinions represented at the Rio Summit, the final documents conceived of sustainable development primarily in terms of the ability to maintain growth levels in both developing and developed countries, with environmental degradation subordinated to economic growth. Current

problems were understood as significant but manageable through education and technological development. Strategies consisted predominantly of multilateral agreements (e.g., the Kyoto agreement) and a reliance on self-regulation by business, along with approaches to ensuring biodiversity and ecosystems that did not impinge in significant ways on the ability of businesses to continue to exploit the natural environment (e.g., setting off small pristine areas or maintaining the gene pool through the collection of specimens to preserved in gene banks) (Kirby et al., 1995).

While the discourse on sustainability has continued to evolve since the Rio Summit, the contested nature of the discourse has remained a constant. In many subsequent documents, however, such disagreements have been downplayed or papered over (e.g., by the use of formal definitions of sustainability, such as that offered by the Brundtland Commission) to ensure a broad, though not very deep, consensus. One place in which this has occurred is in documents relating to the role of universities in promoting sustainability.

Declarations on Universities and Sustainability

The role of universities in promoting environmental sustainability, especially through their teaching function, has been recognized by multilateral bodies for some time. In 1972, for example, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, issued the Stockholm Declaration (UNESCO, 1972). Although it did not focus on the practice of universities, the Stockholm Declaration is commonly cited as the first document to highlight the importance of universities in promoting sustainability. It is the Tbilisi Declaration, however, coming out of the 1977 Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education, sponsored by UNESCO and United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), which marks for many the starting point for formal international environmental education initiatives (UNESCO-UNEP, 1977). A decade and a half later, the key document to come out of the Rio Summit, Agenda 21, would base itself in the Tbilisi Declaration in reaffirming the importance of the teaching role of universities in the promotion of environmental education (Calder & Clugston, 2003a).

For their part, universities have gradually come to acknowledge the variety of roles that they could and should play in the promotion of sustainability, especially over the last two decades. Several international initiatives have been particularly influential. First, in 1990 the president of Tufts University convened an international conference of university leaders, which issued the Talloires Declaration. Proclaiming that “universities’ heads must provide leadership and support to mobilize internal and external challenges so that their institutions respond to this urgent challenge,” the document laid out a ten-point program and challenged other institutions to join and work together for environmental sustainability (UNESCO, 1990, p. 2).³

The Talloires Declaration would serve as a spur to others. The Association of the University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), a U.S.-based organization, would come on board as the official registrar for the Talloires Declaration. Not long after Talloires, the Conference of European Rectors (CRE) – acting in response to the invitation issued in chapter 36 of Agenda 21, but also referencing Talloires – issued its own statement on sustainability (Copernicus Charter, 1994). It also initiated the Copernicus-Campus network, which would become an independent network in 1999. In 2002, the ULSF and Copernicus-Campus joined together with the International Association of Universities (IAU) and UNESCO to form the

Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP), a relationship which would last for five years before being disbanded (Wright, 2002; Calder & Clugston, 2003a).

Canadian universities have also taken up the call to sustainability, both individually and collectively. The initial step in developing inter-university collaboration within Canada was a conference on University Action for Sustainable Development organized in Halifax in 1991. Called in part as a response to the Talloires Declaration, participants reflected on the implications of Talloires for Canadian universities as well as the broader question of how universities can improve the capacity of countries to address issues of development and the environment. The resulting Halifax Declaration (Lester Person Institute for International Development, 1992) called upon universities to rethink how their environmental policies and practices could better contribute to sustainable development at local, national, and international levels. One of the novel aspects of the Halifax document was its Action Plan, which provided Canadian universities with a framework for action, including a series of short-term and long-term goals (Wright, 2002).

The Practice(s) of Sustainability in Universities

There are a variety of ways to delineate the roles and/or functions through which universities might contribute to the promotion of sustainable development (Clugston & Calder, 1999). For our purposes, it is sufficient to delineate two (broadly defined) primary roles of universities – teaching and research – along with two other areas of activity, operations and procurement, which are essential to fulfilling the primary roles. As noted above, teaching is the most strongly emphasized role of universities in international documents on sustainability. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21, for example, lays out a broad agenda by inviting universities and other educational institutions to reorient education towards sustainable development, increase public awareness, and promote training (UNCED, 1992). National and international documents issued by universities themselves, such as Talloires and the Halifax Declaration, further specify possible teaching functions, including activities such as incorporating sustainability issues across the curriculum, developing new programs of study, encouraging student environmental activism, engaging in public outreach, and so on. (Calder & Clugston, 2003b).

While not mentioned by Agenda 21, research represents another key manner in which universities can contribute to sustainable development. Research into sustainability needs to incorporate fundamental and applied approaches as well as interdisciplinary perspectives and methods in order to contribute fully and effectively. Closely associated with the research function of universities are two other activities, public policy engagement and the commercialization of research. While public policy has long been viewed as an arena for engagement by universities, the issue of commercialization, especially the participation of large corporations with government and universities in triple-helix models, has become quite controversial. Critics are skeptical as to whether such involvement with the private sector, especially large corporations, is more likely to contribute to or discourage sustainable development (Reed, 2004). Such skepticism has led to calls for alternative triple-helix models, in which governments and universities collaborate with local social economy partners who have a proven history of concern for sustainable development (MacLeod, MacFarlane, & Davis, 1997).

As mentioned above, in fulfilling their teaching and research functions, universities impact the environment and the prospects for sustainable development in two major ways. On the one hand, they have a direct impact on the environment through their physical operations,

including such areas of policy and practice as building design and maintenance, energy consumption, land use, and transportation. The issue of operations has been a central concern during efforts to “green the university,” and the site of a wide range of initiatives, many of which involve university members with participatory research and hands-on educational opportunities (Wright, 2010). A key issue that tends to arise is how universities are to manage their operations. More specifically, the question is whether they need to adopt environmental management systems, and if so, whether it is adequate to adopt approaches developed with corporate actors in mind (Bekessy, Samson, & Clarkson, 2007).

On the other hand, universities have a slightly less direct, but equally if not more significant impact on sustainability through their purchases of goods and services. There have been increasing demands on universities not only to purchase and offer for sale more environmentally friendly products (paper products, branded goods, food, etc.), but also to ensure full life cycle management of such products (e.g., through recycling, waste reduction and diversion programs). A key indicator of this pressure is the development of online evaluation methods, such as the Sustainable Endowment Institute’s “College Sustainability Report Card” (<http://www.greenreportcard.org/>). In addition, universities have also come under pressure from ethical trade and fair trade movements to ensure that select products offered for sale (sportswear and other branded products, coffee, chocolate, etc.) are produced under conditions that are fair to workers and small producers (Ross, 2006). Universities in particular countries, under pressure from student activists, have taken the lead in meeting such standards. The two major US-based labour rights certifying bodies, the Fair Labor Association (FLA) and the Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), have 208 (<http://www.fairlabor.org>) and 186 (<http://www.workersrights.org>) affiliated universities and colleges in the U.S. and Canada, respectively (this includes some overlap in membership among the two bodies). Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has taken the lead in the development of “fair trade universities,” with more than 120 academic institutions of higher education meeting the standards for this designation (<http://www.fairtrade.org.uk>).

Accounting for Underperformance

While a significant proportion of institutions of higher education have publicly affirmed their commitment to promoting sustainability, progress towards this goal has been slow and uneven. As a number of studies have pointed out, signing declarations has not resulted in the creation of sustainable universities (Corcoran, Calder & Clugston 2002; Bekessy, Samson, & Clarkson, 2007). In the case of Canadian universities, Wright (2002) reported that a decade after the launch of the Halifax Declaration, most of the signatories had not implemented it, while those that did had usually only incorporated the value statements into their own documents without adopting the action plan as the basis of their own university policy. In the literature, a variety of factors are mentioned that might account for the failure of universities in Canada and abroad to effectively take up the sustainability agenda (including the failure to adopt sustainable purchasing policies).

First, there is the question of *planning*. A number of authors point out that many universities have not generally planned for sustainability (Sharp, 2002; Bekessy, Samson, & Clarkson, 2007). Rather, they have tended to rely upon raising awareness and a “club based” approach to change in which small groups (especially student groups) are encouraged to address specific aspects of sustainability and/or develop pilot or demonstration projects. While such an

approach, critics argue, might achieve individual successes (e.g., establishing a recycling program or the erection of an individual green building), it does not provide a viable means for addressing the larger problems at hand (e.g., ensuring that all buildings meet appropriate environmental standards).

Second, there is the issue of *resources*, especially financial resources. Studies frequently point out that specific programs suffer from under-financing. Generally, the underlying cause of the lack of funding is not directly attributed, but the impression is sometimes given that it represents a lack of commitment on the part of universities to promoting sustainability (Thompson & Green, 2005). For their part, university presidents (in Canada, at least) also tend to see underfunding as the primary constraint on the promotion of sustainable universities, but they assert that the ultimate problem of underfunding comes from a lack of public financing for universities (as opposed to a lack of commitment on their part to sustainability) (Wright, 2010).

Third, there is the nature of the *structures* of contemporary universities. A number of authors have argued that, despite their pretensions to rationality, there are a variety of features of universities that make organizational learning difficult, and thereby inhibit the promotion of the transformational change that is required to address issues of sustainability effectively (Clugston & Calder, 1999; Sharp, 2002). More specifically, it is argued that the complexity of the institutions (and the environmental imperative itself), recent periods of extensive growth in universities, mental models of the organization (which hide dysfunctional behaviour), system archetypes (such as the myth of rationality), academic silos, and shifting coalitions make it extremely difficult for sustainability committees to achieve consensus on goals and possible solutions. It is this situation, Sharp argues, that leads to the tendency for universities “to shift their focus from broad reaching systemic transformation to well-bounded projects with lower levels of participation” (2002, p. 130).

Issues of *agency* represent another factor in accounting for underperformance. Several groups of actors are cited as being particularly relevant in this regard. First, while senior administrators are generally acknowledged as being key actors for successful implementation of sustainability initiatives, they are frequently seen as failing to provide effective leadership (Thompson & Green, 2005). Second, students – because they often know very little about how university administrations work, generally feel disempowered, and spend only a few years on campus – tend to pursue smaller, more tangible projects (where a victory seems more feasible), rather than working for more systemic change (Sharp, 2002). Third, active resistance to sustainability initiatives is sometimes cited as a problem. Though the source of such resistance is not always clearly identified, the administrative staff would seem to be one group susceptible to such a charge (Wright, 2010). In addition to failings on the part of particular groups, some authors have pointed to the need for groups of actors to work together as an essential condition for effecting change (Sharp, 2002).

Ideology represents a fifth factor that can come into play with public sector institutions. Murray (2001) has pointed out, for example, that there has been a general tendency for public sector institutions to adopt management approaches (strategic management, purchasing policies, etc.) from the private sector. Transferral of private sector approaches in areas such as procurement, which do not take into account the different goals, mandates, and constraints of public sector institutions, can prove to be sub-optimal and even dysfunctional. Public sector institutions, Murray argues, must develop their own approach to developing procurement policies.

Finally, the *vision* or conceptualization of sustainability itself may be a limiting factor in its effective promotion. Newport, Chesnes and Lindner (2003), for example, have argued that there has been a tendency to overemphasize the environment and to think of sustainability exclusively in terms of the “greening of universities,” thereby failing to incorporate issues of economic development and social equity adequately. The problem here, the authors contend, is twofold. Not only is an underdeveloped notion of sustainability being pursued, but pragmatically, it will be difficult to promote sustainability unless you also appeal to the constituencies concerned about economic development and social equity.

Study on Universities and Purchasing Policies

The Purpose and Design of the Study

There were two broad purposes of this enquiry. The first (more descriptive) goal was to examine the current state of affairs related to efforts by Canadian universities to promote sustainable development. The second (more analytical) task was to provide an account of this state of affairs. For practical reasons, the authors have had to narrow their gaze to focus on a particular function – purchasing policies – through which universities might contribute to sustainable development, rather than examine their practices as a whole. Thus, this study focuses on the role of universities as consumers of goods and resources, and the formal or informal processes by which they construct purchasing policies geared towards “sustainability.” More specifically, the authors decided to investigate whether, in addition to having general purchasing policies (focusing on issues such as conflict of interest, transparency, etc.), universities had developed any of three different types of purchasing policies that might contribute to sustainability: “green” or environmental sustainability policies, ethical trade policies, or fair trade policies.

In examining this issue, the analytic goal has been to determine which factors have influenced decisions regarding the adoption and implementation of policies. The design of the survey reflects this intent. With respect to vision, for example, the distinction between the different types of policy (environmental, ethical trade and fair trade) helps to indicate how a university’s understanding of sustainability can influence the scope of issues taken up under the aegis of sustainability (specifically, whether it primarily focuses on environmental issues or whether it aligns more closely with a broader understanding of sustainable development that includes issues of social justice and development, such as concern for workers’ rights and the plight of small producers in the South). Also integrated into the design of the survey were questions regarding the dynamics of the process of adopting and implementing purchasing policies, including: which types of actors were supportive/not supportive and most influential (at different stages) in decisions regarding the development and implementation of policies; what type of organizational structures and strategies facilitated the adoption of policies; what types of justifications were given for (not) adopting given policies and implementation strategies; and what role resource considerations played in decision-making. These various types of questions were intended to address the roles, as discussed above, that issues of agency, ideology, structure, planning, and resources might play in the adoption and implementation of sustainable purchasing policies.

Method

In this section we will discuss the phases of the research project, the research design, and the challenges of implementing the study. Our research consisted of five phases, including a literature review, research design, survey distribution, data collection, and follow-up interviews.

1) Literature Review

We began the study with a comprehensive literature review on the subjects of environmental, ethical trade, and fair trade purchasing policies in Canada, the United States, and Europe. Key sources of literature, including academic journals, books, and conference presentations, were collected and analysed. In addition, background literature produced by advocacy groups, think tanks, and representative associations in the fair trade and ethical trade movements were reviewed and studied. The purpose of the literature review was to identify the gaps in knowledge surrounding the processes and challenges of developing and deploying green, ethical, and fair trade purchasing policies in public institutions. This work yielded the background knowledge necessary for formulating the guiding research questions and also served to structure the initial key informant interviews.

2) Research Design

The formation of the survey instrument began with preliminary telephone interviews with key contacts at Canadian universities and representative associations in order to identify crucial issues, concerns, and questions surrounding ethical and fair trade purchasing policies. These informants were selected based on their interest in the research project as well as their experience in the field of procurement and purchasing. The incentive provided for participation in the key informant interviews was a promise to share the findings of the study with participants through formal publication of the study's findings. Initially, ten key informants were interviewed by the lead researchers. These initial interviews were conducted in order to design the study. The key informant interviews were conducted by telephone and lasted for approximately twenty minutes. Informants were asked five questions in order to prompt a discussion around the key issues that related to the formation, implementation, and monitoring of fair and ethical purchasing policies, as well as to derive a sense of what knowledge gaps exist.

After compiling the data derived from the interviews into themes, the research team proceeded to design the research study. In order to ensure a breadth of feedback, it was decided that an online survey targeted at Canadian post-secondary institutions would be best suited for widespread data collection. The key informant interviews revealed that "sustainable purchasing" policies, primarily understood as involving environmental issues, were important for the target group and in some instances were seen as overlapping with issues of ethical trade and fair trade. For this reason, the study was broadened to include three types of alternative purchasing policies – environmental (or green), ethical trade, and fair trade – and reformulated in terms of the larger, overarching conception of sustainability. These three types of "alternative" purchasing policies, which focus on issues of sustainability, stand in contrast to more conventional, or general, purchasing policies which address issues of procedural fairness (such as competitive bidding procedures, conflicts of interest, etc.).

The three researchers collectively designed a preliminary online survey (which was to be administered through Survey Monkey). They tested the survey on four subjects who were selected on a random basis from the key informant set. The test group was given a month to provide comments on the survey design, logic, and content. After review of the comments, the final survey was narrowed to a set of forty-nine questions and to an approximate completion time of fifteen to twenty-five minutes.

The survey was divided into the following sections: Information and Consent, Demographic Information, General Purchasing Policies, Environmentally Sustainable (Green) Purchasing Policies, Ethical Trade (Labour Standards) Purchasing Policies, and Fair Trade Purchasing Policies. The survey instrument was programmed with conditional logic, and the software catered the questions to the different circumstances of each institution based on the previous answer. For example, for those institutions without green, fair trade, or ethical purchasing policies, the survey would switch to questions regarding the possibility of developing these purchasing policies or the difficulties encountered in attempting to adopt such policies.

3) Survey Distribution

The university sample was derived manually through online research. Universities were identified based on the list publicly provided by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and one of the researchers proceeded to locate the contact information of the purchasing or procurement manager at each institution by visiting their websites and directories. The direct email addresses of ninety purchasing managers or purchasing departments were located. Where no purchasing or procurement office was available, an email contact for the finance department or general inquiries was located. This yielded forty email addresses. The result was a comprehensive sample of 130 subjects representing universities and colleges across all Canadian provinces and territories.

An invitation (in both English and French) to participate in the online survey was sent by email to 130 post-secondary education institutions in Canada. The survey instrument was available in English and French online at Survey Monkey and began collecting data in February 2009. Respondents were invited to participate in the survey three times over the course of four months.

4) Data Collection

Overall, the survey collected data for six months, and yielded twenty-five responses in English and three in French, representing a 21.54 per cent response rate. Only degree-granting universities responded to the survey. If we factor out community colleges (none of which responded), then the response rate calculated on the basis of the eighty-nine degree-granting universities rises to 29.21 per cent.⁴ If we approach our data from the perspective of the size of the universities we sampled as measured by their total population of full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate students (631,345),⁵ our university sample represents 40.76 per cent of the total university student population of Canada.⁶ For our analysis, we broke down our university sample into “large universities” (25,000 or more students), “small universities” (less than 25,000 students), and “recently established universities” (universities that were formerly community colleges and have recently been given degree-granting status by their provincial governments).⁷ **Table 8.1** shows that our sample represents 76.47 per cent of all large Canadian universities, 16.67 per cent of small universities, and 33.33 per cent of recently established

universities. **Table 8.2** shows the regional breakdown of our sample: 20 per cent of universities in the Atlantic provinces, 29.41 per cent of Quebec's universities, 56.52 per cent of Ontario's, 14.28 per cent of universities in the Prairie provinces, and 26.67 per cent of universities in British Columbia.

A statistical summary and breakdown of the responses was compiled by Survey Monkey and was available in aggregate or on a per-response basis for review by the research team. These statistical aggregates were reviewed and analysed for the purpose of revealing the findings. Additionally, individual responses, especially where comments were provided, were reviewed by the research team in order to identify the qualitative nuances not captured by the statistical aggregates.

5) Follow-Up Interviews

A final round of interviews was conducted by a research assistant with a selected group of nine informants in order to obtain further insight into their responses and to confirm the survey findings. Representatives from four large, two small, and three recently established universities from across Canada were interviewed. The informants were selected on the basis of: (a) their indication on the initial survey that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, and (b) obtaining a representative range of institutions at different stages in the process of developing sustainable purchasing policies. The interviews were conducted by phone and generally lasted around thirty minutes. The questions varied, depending on the stage of purchasing policy development, but all focused on the following issues: who initiates policies, what conditions induce policies, what are the perceived and real barriers to policies, and where is information on policies sourced by purchasing managers.

Research Challenges

The study confronted several challenges throughout the duration of the research, especially as a result of the reliance on cost-effective online and email technologies. The first relates to reaching the target research subjects. Due to the impersonal nature of email invitations, it is unknown whether target subjects received the request to participate in the study. It is plausible that some requests for participation were labelled as spam and automatically diverted to the trash folders of recipient email boxes. Moreover, where a personal email was not available for a purchasing or procurement department at the university, it is difficult to know whether the survey invitation reached the intended target subject. It is difficult to assess how response rates may have been affected by these factors.

Another challenge relates to the ability of target subjects to answer survey questions covering all three research themes (i.e., sustainability, ethical trade, and fair trade purchasing). Due to the organization of institutional structures across universities, different departments may have responsibility for different areas covered by the survey (e.g., one may be responsible for sustainability while another is responsible for general procurement). In such circumstances, the survey could only have been effectively filled out with participation and coordination across departments. A lack of such coordination may have prevented the survey from being filled out by the intended subjects and/or could have resulted in certain sections of the form not being adequately completed. Moreover, respondents may not have been part of the institution long enough to comment on all three themes. For example, sustainability procurement initiatives in

some universities began as early as fifteen years ago and staff involved in the process of establishing the policy may no longer be employed at the institution or department in question. Without personal knowledge of the history, a limited ability on the part of respondents to tap into institutional memory could have significantly affected the completeness and accuracy of responses. This point was alluded to by several of our follow-up interviewees who had arrived at their jobs as procurement managers after policies were already in place. Furthermore, a lack of knowledge about some areas may have discouraged subjects from completing or submitting the survey, thus lowering the response rate.

In addition, the timing of the survey and the cycle of the academic year raises another potential implementation challenge. This is unlikely to have played a significant role, however, as the survey was distributed in February 2009 and was available for completion for six months (and several reminders were sent out). This means that, even taking into account vacation time and particular planning cycles, in the vast majority of cases administrative staff would have had some time available to fill out the survey.

Finally, we will mention the length of the survey, which may have impacted the response rate. The forty-nine questions were extensive and could have presented an overwhelming task to subjects lacking the background knowledge, institutional memory, or the time to complete the survey. Some questions may have required respondents to engage in an extended hunt for information that was not readily available. This may have affected response rates and the number of “unable to comment” or “not applicable” or “do not know” responses.

Results

The results of our research are presented below.⁸ The results are broken down according to the four different types of purchasing policies distinguished in the survey.

General Purchasing Policies

While the broad concern of this study was on sustainable purchasing policies, to get some baseline data, questions about general purchasing policies were also posed. The vast majority of the respondents, 93 per cent, reported having a general purchasing policy. These policies typically included provisions involving competitive bidding processes, conflicts of interest, acting in good faith, and fair and impartial award recommendations.

Table 8.1: Purchasing Policies at Canadian Universities and Colleges

	Total #	Responses	General Policy	Green Policy	Ethical Trade Policy	Fair Trade Policy	MSN⁹	Talloires Signee¹⁰
Large Universities	17	13	11	6	6	1	9	2
Small Universities	54	9	9	1	5	3	3	1
Recently Established Universities	18	6	6	4	1	0	1	0
Totals	89	28	26	11	12	4	13	3

Table 8.2: Geographic Distribution of Purchasing Policies

	Total #	Responses	General Policy	Green Policy	Ethical Trade Policy	Fair Trade Policy	MSN
Atlantic Provinces	20	4	4	1	0	0	1
Quebec	17	5	4	2	2	0	0
Ontario	23	13	13	4	7	3	10
Prairie Provinces	14	2	1	2	1	0	1
British Columbia	15	4	4	2	2	1	1
Territories	0	0	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Totals	89	28	26	11	12	4	13

It was not possible to determine directly through the survey the considerations that went into the development of the general policies. The general components of the policies, however, tend to reflect standard assumptions (in neo-classical economics and related management traditions) about the purposes of general procurement policies. These include the assumptions that goods should be procured at the lowest cost possible and that procedural norms in accord with the logic of competitive markets are necessary for ensuring this goal. While in principle, the tradition of neo-classical economics acknowledges that the costs of externalities need to be taken into consideration, in practice this stipulation is generally not incorporated into cost calculations.

Green Purchasing Policies

While the vast majority of universities that responded to the survey had a general purchasing policy, less than half, 42 per cent, reported having a green purchasing policy.¹¹ Moreover, subsequent interviews and analysis of the actual policies revealed that in the majority of these cases, there was not actually an explicit policy on environmental sustainability. It appears that there was some significant confusion between the notion of having a green policy and incorporating some environmental concerns into a more general purchasing policy (or adopting some green *practices*). For example, when pressed on this issue, one respondent articulated it this way: “We have a component of sustainable purchasing in our policy” (I1). Moreover, in the cases in which green policies were in place, they tended to focus on a limited range of products (e.g., paper products, computers, printers, photocopiers, lighting) and issues (e.g., energy consumption). Such an approach might be characterized as a policy of convenience or a low-hanging fruit approach, rather than a systematic effort to address issues of environmental sustainability.

While only a minority reported having a policy, the issue of green policies seems to be very much a topic of discussion in universities. Overall, almost 90 per cent of the respondents indicated that they are considering or have considered adopting green policies. Moreover, in follow-up interviews, purchasing managers were eager to indicate that, although their institution had not yet adopted a sustainability policy, they did have a draft of a policy or were in the

process of developing one. However, there seemed to be a lot of ambiguous space between having a policy and being in the process of developing one. One interviewee encapsulated this grey area between intention and concrete policy well: “[We] do have the policies but we have not expanded on them, they are part of the evaluation process but I see that they need to go further” (I2).

An interesting point that arose in a number of the follow-up interviews with universities that had not adopted an official policy was the fact that in most of these institutions, there has been some institutional reorganization around green issues, including the creation of official administrative “champions” of (environmental) sustainability. A number of universities reported hiring a “green coordinator” (I2), “sustainability manager” (I3), or a “sustainability officer” (I5), either to coordinate green policies across the university, to work under the procurement manager, or to work under facilities management in collaboration with the procurement office.

In terms of their perception of the agents involved in driving discussion around policies, all managers indicated that students constituted the key group in raising issues of environmental sustainability. Faculty members were also cited by many respondents as having played a role, but their participation does not seem to have been as prominent. In follow-up interviews, the support of faculty members was often seen to be ancillary and limited to individuals or small groups. One follow-up interview participant, for example, expressed the situation this way:

The big push comes from a student group; a group called ... They are the sustainability group from the students. There is also a faculty member well known for his environmental considerations and he is a resource as an expert. (I3)

While students, and to a much lesser degree individual faculty members, were seen as key to raising the issue of green policies and pressuring for their adoption, other internal (to the university) and external stakeholders seemed to have played little or no role. In terms of internal stakeholders, for example, staff and faculty unions seem to have been almost entirely absent from the process in most instances. It is also interesting to note that the purchasing policy managers did not generally see themselves as playing (or having the right to play) a role in policy development, despite the fact that they were often key channels of information on decisions regarding the adoption of policies. Some, however, did express a willingness to be more involved.

With regards to external stakeholders, while community organizations are sometimes mentioned, their influence seems to have been minor. The one major external stakeholder that is an exception to this trend is government, which was perceived by two-thirds of the respondents as having a positive impact on their decision to adopt green policies. Government, of course, has the ability to influence university policy in very pragmatic ways through its role as the primary funder and regulator of institutions of higher education. One respondent summed up what was seen as the key role of government in the following manner:

The largest [external] group [for influencing green purchasing policies at universities] is the public sector through the department of finance of the Ontario government. Their objective is to try to get all those organizations that are partially funded by the Ontario government, which includes educational facilities, hospitals, municipalities, etc., to implement these policies. (I7)¹²

While students are seen as the key initiators in raising green issues, and government is acknowledged as playing a key role in influencing the environment in which decisions to adopt policies are made, policy managers generally perceived senior university administrators as being

the key actors in determining whether a green policy was actually adopted or not. A key question then becomes which factors in particular induce administrators to decide to adopt green policies.

From the perspective of the purchasing managers, senior administrators who were “champions” were key to the expeditious adoption of the policies. However, managers did not typically experience university administrators as showing great vision and leadership when it came to the cause of sustainability, at least in terms of initiating policies. In most instances, senior administrators did not emerge as champions of green policies without pressure from below. (Board members were perceived to be even less supportive of green policies.)

When the issue of adopting a green policy was raised, managers saw senior administrators primarily concerned with the costs involved. In this regard, managers perceived resource limitations to be a determining factor in administrators’ decisions to adopt purchasing policies or not, where resources were primarily understood in terms of the short-term cost implications of paying more for “green” products. Here, the attitudes of senior administrators often stood in contrast with the self-reported views of many of the managers themselves. One purchasing policy manager, for example, commented that sustainable policies are simply “the right thing to do” (I9), while another said they must be enacted for “the good of mother earth” (I5).

Moreover, administrators tended to assume, at least initially, that there would be significant costs for adopting policies. In this regard, they typically lagged behind purchasing managers, who were much more likely to perceive (through their own practice, talking with product representatives and colleagues from other universities, etc.) that there could actually be significant cost savings in the long run by adopting green purchasing policies (at least in some key areas).¹³

While an absence of vision and leadership on the part of senior administrators was seen as an important constraint on efforts to adopt green policies, purchasing managers also pointed to the complexity of university structures, which tend to result in a lack of effective coordination, information sharing and planning amongst different divisions and departments of universities. The degree to which problems of complexity influenced the information available to senior administrators in their decision-making processes was not clear from the data. This would partly depend on the degree to which senior administrators relied upon staff in particular departments to supply data (or whether they incorporated research findings from faculty, outside consultants, etc.) and how they, in turn, procured their information.

While our data do not provide much detail with regard to the former issue, with respect to the latter it was clear that purchasing policy managers relied heavily upon three main sources for their information regarding the issues of environmental sustainability (e.g., the “environmental” quality of green products, their availability, their costs, etc.). A large majority (88 per cent) of respondents reported relying upon certification programs (e.g., Energy Star) for information. A substantial number (63 per cent), however, also indicated that they relied upon suppliers for information. One respondent expressed the situation this way: “I get information from bulletins and websites ... suppliers are our knowledge base” (I2). As we expand on below, colleagues in other universities represented the third key source of information.

Once policies had been implemented, purchasing policy managers perceived that stakeholders were generally satisfied with the results, and some even expressed the opinion that the standards adopted should be more stringent. Nearly half reported that there were significant problems with the implementation of the program, but most did not report any major difficulties with suppliers, nor were there major cost implications. Despite their overall satisfaction with

their policies, it was not immediately clear how effective the policies were in their actual environmental impact, or in their precise long-term costs. A major concern here is the fact, as noted above, that many managers continued to rely heavily on suppliers for information about the environmental quality of the products, along with certification labels.

It should be noted that in implementing policies, managers also have another key source of information: their peers. They rely heavily on the opinions of other university managers and the experiences that they have had with suppliers when making their own decisions around sustainability.¹⁴ A key location for this information exchange is at the annual or semi-annual meetings of procurement managers – a point that was made strongly by a number of the respondents to the follow-up interviews. One manager noted that “sustainability is at the agenda of every one of those meetings” (I2). Another commented, “Yes, we talk almost daily [with other university purchasing departments]. We also have two meetings during the year where we discuss new things coming up or any problems with ethical purchasing, we also find out about different suppliers” (I5). The quality of the information that was shared among managers with respect to the environmental quality of products was not entirely clear, however.

Ethical Trade Purchasing Policies

The reported prevalence of ethical trade purchasing policies (48 per cent) was similar to that of green purchasing policies (42 per cent). (See Table 8.3) The number of those reported to be developing a policy were slightly less, however. The total number claiming to have or be considering an ethical trade policy amounted to 65 per cent (as compared to 90 per cent of those who had or considered adopting a green policy).

As in the case of green policies, the accuracy of these numbers is open to question. A report from the MSN, for example, points out that only nineteen Canadian universities (or 21.35 per cent of all Canadian universities) have explicit ethical trade policies (MSN, 2008; see also MSN, 2004). Interestingly, our data also revealed that, while fourteen of the nineteen universities appearing in the MSN report as having “no sweat” licensing policies were in our sample, four of these institutions from our sample did not self-report having any ethical trade purchasing policy. Analysis of the data and subsequent interviews revealed that a major reason for these discrepancies was that the managers tended to use different terms and to conflate ethical trade and environmentally sustainable (green) policies. Furthermore, as with green policies, there was some confusion between having official policies and the inclusion of some wording in more general purchasing policies.

With regard to the actors who are driving discussions on ethical trade policies, managers were again united in their perceptions that it was students who were the main protagonists. One respondent, for example, having been asked who initiated the ethical trade policy, answered, “It was basically students” (I5). Another replied, “Generally it has been the student body [that motivated changing ethical trade policies]” (I1). While the University of Toronto was the first to adopt a “sweat free” purchasing code after a much-publicized student sit-in of the president’s office by its Students Against Sweatshops group in 2000 (Bégin, Wolff, & Atkinson 2005), since then, another seventeen Canadian universities have adopted such a policy, with student activism or sit-ins playing key roles in a number of these cases (MacAdams, 2002; Wells, n.d.). Further corroborating these perceptions by purchasing managers is the fact that at least sixteen of the twenty student-run Public Interest Research Groups (PIRGs) currently active in Canadian universities have or recently had working groups dedicated to issues such as sustainable and

green campuses, fair trade, and ethical and “sweat free” trade.¹⁵ In addition, at least two student conferences have been held recently dealing with issues of fair trade and ethical purchasing at Canadian universities.¹⁶ Wells (n.d.) writes: “Through sit-ins, rallies, teach-ins, anti-sweat fashion shows, hunger strikes, occupations, political theatre and other forms of education, publicity and protest, students have been demanding the adoption of ethical buying policies throughout Canada, Australia, the US, and much of Europe” (p. 1; see also Wells, 2004).

Table 8.3: Ethical Trade Policies in Canadian Universities and Colleges

	Total #	Responses	Self-Reporting	MSN Report	WRC Membership	FLA Membership
Large Universities	17	13	6	9	5	4
Small Universities	54	9	5	3	2	0
Recently Established Universities	18	6	1	1	0	0
Totals	89	28	12	13	7	4

Again, as in the case of green policies, faculty members were seen as playing a significant role, but ancillary to students. Also similar to the aforementioned policies was the fact that pressure from campus-based unions was not seen as particularly important in driving ethical trade policies. This situation seems perhaps even more surprising in this context given formal expressions of solidarity between unions and labour activists on such issues (Wells, 2004). Also interesting was the fact that – more than was the case in green purchasing policies – pressure from other stakeholder groups and influence from the practices of other universities were seen as contributing significantly to the adoption of these policies. This may be a result of the specific nature of the “branded goods” that are typically the products that fall under such policies (e.g., spirit wear, sports uniforms and sports equipment). These goods have a higher public profile, as do many of the companies that tend to supply them to universities, and the conditions of their production have been the object of investigations by different non-state labelling bodies as well as labour rights organizations (O’Rourke, 2003; Einwohner & Spencer, 2005; Schaller, 2007).¹⁷

The dynamics involved in terms of getting university administrators to agree to ethical trade policies seem to have been different than in the case of green policies. Again, ethical purchasing policies were not typically perceived as being high on the priority lists of senior administrators. On the other hand, the stakes involved in adopting them were also not as high (as this represented a very narrow range of goods in relatively small quantities). In practice, this meant that while leadership among senior administrators on this issue (i.e., the incorporation of labour standards as part of a social justice component of the university’s mission) was often lacking, this did not necessarily inhibit the adoption of a “no sweat” policy as administrators seemed to be willing to consider policies on the basis of relatively straightforward calculations involving costs. Thus, in this case having a “champion” among the administration was generally less important than the fact that there were few cost implications to adopting the policy (as well as some potential reputational costs from not doing so).

As such, the key limiting factor which seemed to have influenced the openness of administrators to adopting ethical trade policies the most was the issue of resources. In terms of costs, some purchasing managers did identify higher prices of “no sweat” products and the fees

involved in working with certification bodies as potential considerations. They also expressed two other concerns. One of these was the availability of “sweat free” products. This was more of a concern for the managers themselves, rather than senior administrators, and one usually expressed with regard to whether this would cause any problems with their existing suppliers. The second concern, which managers saw as more important for administrators, was reputational costs: that is, how the impact of not adopting a policy might affect the reputation of the institution (especially if neighbouring institutions had done so).

Again, the issue of costing is not entirely separate from the related issues of structure and ideology. In terms of ideology, it is important to note that managers and administrators tended to assume traditional cost accounting practices rather than adopting social accounting approaches, which could have contributed to a stronger case for implementing an ethical trade policy. With respect to structure, the complexity of the university as an institution is not so much of an issue here as is the manner in which the institutions tend to collect information. Again, even more so than in the case of green policies, there was a strong tendency on the part of managers to rely on information that comes directly from suppliers, rather than certifying bodies such as the FLA and WRC.

Once universities implemented ethical trade policies, the experience of purchasing managers was universally positive. The cost implications of adopting the policies were seen to be minor, few or no problems arose with suppliers and there were positive benefits in terms of institutional reputation. For the most part, the managers did not express any particular concerns about monitoring. Some noted that their institutions had set up stakeholder committees for oversight of the policy. One respondent, for example, explained that “for some of the tenders and for most of the major contracts ... [these are] done by committee with students, grad students, faculty reps included in an evaluation committee to make sure the products that are bought are ethical” (I2). It seemed that in other universities, however, managers retained oversight of the policies and often continued to rely on suppliers themselves for monitoring information rather than certifying bodies.

Fair Trade Purchasing Policies

Although there is already a strong fair trade university network in the UK with established standards for membership, in North America this network has been slower to develop. This may help to account for the fact that only five universities reported having a fair trade policy. However, another 50 per cent of the respondents indicated that they are considering developing a policy. Among those that claimed to have a fair trade policy, only two used FLO certification as the standard of fair trade (two others mentioned using other labels). Again, there seemed to be some confusion between having a fair trade policy and incorporating practices.

The dynamics with respect to developing fair trade policies seemed to mirror closely those in the development of ethical trade policies. Students were the primary initiators of fair trade policies, though they tended to work more closely with other internal and external stakeholders. In at least one instance, at McMaster University, this included working closely with senior administrators (Wells, n.d.). Cost considerations and the ability to monitor were the primary concerns that were raised. Among the few universities that had implemented policies (which involved only the requirement of offering fair trade tea and coffee options),¹⁸ the response from stakeholders as reported by managers was universally positive and there were few or no cost considerations or implementation problems that arose.

Summary of Results

The key findings of the research can be summarized as follows:

1. Internal stakeholder (especially student and faculty) pressure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of sustainable purchasing policies.
2. Administrators play a key role in implementing sustainable purchasing policies as “champions,” but often need to be convinced (by pressure from below or by cost-benefit analysis) to implement these policies.
3. External community perception can be a consideration but typically does not drive the implementation of sustainable purchasing policies.
4. Ease and effectiveness of monitoring and short-term cost considerations are seen as major hurdles by administration, while procurement managers see long-term cost savings and environmental reasons for implementing such policies.
5. Awareness of sustainable purchasing in all three of its forms is generally high among procurement managers (though detailed understanding may be lacking).
6. Procurement manager networks and suppliers’ documents contribute significantly to managers’ awareness of issues and their decisions about what products best conform to the university’s standards and values.
7. Purchasing managers are supportive of sustainable/ethical trade/fair trade purchasing policies as they believe that they are the “right thing to do.” However, all of the managers felt that they were restricted in their ability to promote policies or to make significant changes in practice without authorization from above. This sense of powerlessness seemed to be felt more strongly in the recently established universities.
8. A key driver of university sustainability policies (although not ethical trade or fair trade) are top-down initiatives from provincial governments for greening the public sector.
9. Coalitions of internal stakeholders can be effective in initiating and implementing sustainable purchasing policies. Such coalitions seem to become more prominent as sustainable purchasing policies become more inclusive of equity and development concerns.

Discussion

In our findings, while some patterns in the adoption of policies were discerned, we were not able to demonstrate statistically significant correlations or support strong causal accounts based upon more qualitative data. In terms of patterns of adopting policies, there was a clear difference in participation rates with respect to different types of purchasing policies (see [Tables 8.1 and 8.2](#)) according to university size and location, but not any consistent pattern across all policy types. Ethical trade policies, for example, were adopted almost exclusively by established institutions, with only one recently established university having an ethical trade policy. It was also the case that the larger, more established universities tended to be members in the FLA and WRC. Similarly, none of the recently established universities had a fair trade policy. Geographically, relatively more Ontario universities tended to have ethical or fair trade policies.

On the other hand, the newly established universities reported a higher rate of green policies than the smaller established universities.

One consistent pattern that does seem to emerge relates to the order in which universities have adopted policies. Almost all universities had general purchasing policies and had adopted these first. Next, the universities tended to adopt green policies and/or ethical trade policies. Fair trade policies tended to be the last to be adopted. The reasons for this pattern seem to reflect the historical circumstances of the promotion of these policies, especially in the United States. Thus, for example, while the first fair trade certification body was developed in 1988, in Canada there was no national certification body until 1995 and in the U.S. not until 1997. The first fair trade universities were recognized in the UK only in 2002. By contrast, after the FLA was initiated by the Clinton administration, it spread rapidly among American universities throughout the 1990s and a strong student movement grew, led in part by United Students against Sweatshops (Moore, 2000; Featherstone, 2002; O'Rourke, 2003).

Perhaps the more important issue relating to the adoption of policies that the study was not able to address adequately was the internal dynamics involved in the decisions on the part of universities to adopt policies or not. Our study has highlighted above some of the factors that can inhibit the promotion of purchasing policies (e.g., resource deficits, ideology, structure), but listing factors does not provide an explanation. The latter requires some account of agency. As we noted above, while a range of agents may be involved in advocating for policies, it is ultimately senior administrators that must be brought on board for policies to emerge. Thus, a causal explanation for the pattern of adoption of purchasing policies must be based upon the decision-making processes of senior administrators.

One of the most common factors that purchasing managers cited with respect to the decisions to adopt sustainable purchasing policies was the catalytic role of key actors. Such key actors were commonly referred to as "champions" or as exercising "leadership." A number of different actors were sometimes cited as being "champions," including faculty members, staff members whose job involved implementing purchasing policies ("official champions") and senior administrators. While the role of the latter group was most commonly seen as the key to shepherding a purchasing policy through, no clear patterns came through from the survey and follow-up interviews as to the nature of the motivation of such actors or the actions in which they engaged. The one fact that was clear from the data was that it was typically pressure from students, who tended to initiate discussion around policies, especially in the case of ethical trade and fair trade policies.¹⁹

It was not evident, however, in this context of pressure from below, how "champions" arose to take up the cause of "sustainability." It is not clear whether such champions were primarily motivated by personal convictions or whether they were more concerned about protecting or promoting the good of the institution. Similarly, it was not clear whether such champions led by taking risky decisions or by promoting learning and developing consensus. Thus, while most respondents saw individual leadership as an important factor in facilitating the development of policies, our data did not provide sufficient information to distinguish any clear patterns regarding the nature of leadership and the role that it played in policy formation.

The flip side of questioning the agency of senior administrators is whether different structures or practices (including the implementation of social accounting) might diminish the importance of administrators or, perhaps more likely, facilitate their making decisions to support the establishment of sustainable purchasing policies. Purchasing managers tend to feel that the main blockage in adopting and implementing sustainable, ethical, or fair trade policies by their

universities is the lack of coordination amongst different divisions and departments. With clearer channels of communication, policies that administrators see as compelling (due to cost-effectiveness and key stakeholder support) could be generated.

Policy Recommendations

There are a number of policy recommendations that flow from this study (and the related literature and practice on Canadian universities). We have organized these around the basic categories, which were seen in the literature as inhibiting the development of successful sustainable purchasing policies.

Vision: Many senior university administrators formally subscribe to a vision of sustainability for their institutions (e.g., in the form of the Talloires Declaration) and it is unlikely that anyone would oppose such visions. Moreover, many universities have sought to embody this vision in the core activities of the university, teaching (e.g., in programs in environmental studies, social justice studies, and business and the environment) and research (e.g., establishing research institute on sustainability and international development). Universities typically have not integrated a vision of sustainability as well in the operations side of their mandate, including in their purchasing policies. Here there is a need for senior administrators to see sustainability not as an “add on” to their core mission, but as an integral part of their mandate. What this means, more specifically, is directing the university’s concern about teaching and research (and policy development) not just outwards, but also inwards towards the university’s own practices in a systematic fashion. The university needs to see itself (its structures, its practices, and its policies) as an essential site of research, education, practical innovation, and engagement on sustainability.

Agency: When confronted with demands for more sustainable policies and practices, universities often respond defensively. Students, in particular, often feel that they are ignored, patronized, and/or deflected when they raise concerns about the need for systematic attention to broadly understood issues of sustainability. Other members of the university community might feel that their skills and expertise are not being sought out and taken advantage of for the promotion of sustainability on campus. This includes faculty members (many of whom are recognized experts and may even consult with other institutions on such issues) as well as purchasing managers (who typically feel that their position is limited to implementing policies rather than playing a more active role in the development of policy). There is also a range of external actors who are actively involved in issues of sustainability and who are interested in engaging with universities in the development of more sustainable practices and policies. Senior administrators need to create an environment and structures that encourage and facilitate engagement by a full range of stakeholders in the development and implementation of sustainability policies.

Structure: Universities have, in a sense, a bifurcated structure. On the one hand, the core academic mission is based on the practice of collegial governance, which involves democratic representation by key stakeholder groups (e.g., faculty, administration, and students). On the other, the university’s administration operates on a structure more akin to a state or corporate bureaucracy, in which there is a clear top-down chain of command from the president and senior administrators (who are subject to board oversight) through various operational units and departments. A basic concern about the university’s administrative structure in relationship to

sustainable purchasing policies is that its complex nature does not allow for effective collaboration in the development and implementation of purchasing policies. Part of the problem here may be the top-down logic inherent in this part of the university's bureaucratic structure. It is possible that a more effective approach to developing and implementing sustainable purchasing policies is to draw upon the more collegial approach to governance that characterizes the academic mission of the university. This approach may more effectively encourage stakeholder participation, break down academic and administrative silos, encourage the sharing of information and learning, and promote more experimentation and innovation. Senior administrators should promote experiments with more collegial and participatory approaches to policy development and implementation, whose decisions may still be subject to approval by senior administrators and the board of governors.

Resources: Despite being subjected to budget cuts and rising costs, universities are immeasurably rich in terms of the resources, especially the human resources, that they have available. Internal human resources include students, faculty, staff, administrative personnel, and board members. External human resources, who are frequently happy to partner with universities in different ways, include government, other institutions of higher education, NGOs, social economy actors, community organizations, and more. As noted above, universities need to engage a full range of stakeholders in the development and implementation of purchasing policies. To do this effectively and systematically, senior administrators need to encourage participation in ways that overlap with the core missions of the university: teaching and research. Many students are taking courses and entire programs of study that specifically address issues of sustainability, while many faculty members and research institutes dedicate significant parts of their time and resources to research issues of sustainable development and promote more effective policies and practices. Arrangements need to be developed, promoted, and institutionalized that enable students to pursue their academic interests in issues of sustainability in ways that contribute to the development and implementation of sustainable purchasing policies (e.g., the promotion of student-run businesses or practicum courses within the university). External stakeholders (e.g., NGOs, social economy enterprises, or community organizations) may be effective and essential partners in promoting such student involvement. Similarly, the university needs to encourage participation by faculty members more systematically, not only as researchers on sustainability, but as experts in policy development and implementation strategies.

Ideology: While universities are the social institutions par excellence at generating knowledge, as institutions they can become ensnared in the trap of uncritically accepting dominant theoretical traditions of inquiry. When developing purchasing policies, universities need to critically reflect on the understanding of sustainability that shapes their policies, and the practices and institutions that they use to measure, monitor, and implement such policies, rather than unreflectively accepting dominant approaches. In the case of the understanding of sustainability, universities need to challenge a dominant trend, which conceives of sustainability primarily in environmental terms, or considers sustainability strictly against financial costs, at the expense of social sustainability. There is substantial evidence from development studies and related fields that there is a strong internal connection between the pursuit of environmental and social sustainability, not only at the level of normative theory, but in the development of effective strategies (Cavanaugh & Mander, 2004; Loxley, Silver, & Sexsmith, 2007; Noya & Clarence, 2009; Mook & Sumner, 2010). In terms of practices for measuring and monitoring the success of sustainability programs, universities need to move beyond conventional cost

accounting approaches and employ social and environmental accounting practices. One way of working towards developing these practices might include a national consortium of universities engaging in sustainable purchasing. For example, the MSN recommends establishing “a national consortium of No Sweat universities” that could work collaboratively on concerns, issues, and benchmarks towards implementing sustainability (MSN, 2004, p. 8). Finally, with respect to institutions, universities need to consider whether alternative economic firms (e.g., co-operatives or social enterprises with formal missions that commit them to social purposes such as sustainable development) might prove to be more appropriate suppliers than conventional firms, whose primary commitment is earning profits for their shareholders.

Conclusion

The research outlined above is an important step in connecting the theoretical discussion of sustainability and sustainable development at universities with the on-the-ground practice of purchasing. It attempts to connect the mission of universities to the practices that exist alongside it. The primary purpose of the research is not to judge universities in Canada on their sustainable purchasing policy development, but rather to outline the issues contained and often obscured in these two sets of practices. It also details the processes through which purchasing policies are developed, and identifies the key actors in developing such policies. Finally, it attempts to explicate the key perceived and real limits to developing more nuanced practices of sustainable purchasing at universities in the Canadian context.

The authors are aware that further research is important for corroborating and developing some of these findings, as well as promoting more effective implementation of policies. While some such areas were noted above, as part of the conclusion to this chapter and the collection, special mention needs to be made here of the potential importance of social (or sustainable) accounting in facilitating the adoption of purchasing policies in public institutions, especially universities. There are three contributions in particular that need to be investigated.

First, there seems to be significant potential for social accounting to make explicit the nature and extent of the contributions of university purchasing policies towards promoting sustainability. The specific contributions that universities make to promoting sustainability can be, on the one hand, more facilitative in nature. This would involve providing a market for those offering more sustainably made products. This can be done by universities either directly purchasing more sustainable products or requiring vendors operating on their campuses to make such products available. On the other hand, universities can be more directly involved by actively developing programs to support their purchasing policies (e.g., composting and recycling programs) as well as actively supporting firms which are providing more sustainable products (e.g., through research and education). This latter approach may involve universities deploying their research and teaching functions in support of their purchasing policies. This may happen coincidentally (through decisions by individual researchers and teachers) and/or may be more actively encouraged by universities (through more formal relationships with business and community partners). A variety of quantitative and qualitative social accounting methods could be used to measure such contributions by universities.

Second, universities can potentially make use of such social accounting practices to engage with different stakeholder groups in ways that provide benefits to the university and/or encourage the promotion of purchasing policies. One key group is students, who may be

particular interested in sustainability profiles when choosing a university. A further consideration for students might be the degree to which their studies (and research possibilities) can be related to the further improvement of the university's sustainability record. Similar considerations may be important for universities in attracting new professors. Another key stakeholder group that may be interested in social accounting measures generated by universities is government. To the degree that governments are interested in the improving the sustainability performance of public institutions (as in the case of Ontario and Nova Scotia), then social accounting measures can be very important for universities in demonstrating that universities are not only formally complying with policies, but are actually generating social and environmental value. Similarly, more sustainable practices by universities can benefit local communities and business stakeholders.

Third, social accounting can potentially facilitate the adoption and extension of purchasing policies. By more accurately indicating the true costs and benefits involved in adopting policies, social accounting provides champions within the university with arguments to overcome opposition from skeptics. Moreover, social accounting might be able to facilitate learning among managers and administrators, which in turn might encourage more extensive use of such programs and more active participation by a wide variety of stakeholders.

While there would seem to be a logical link between public purchasing policies (in public institutions such as universities) and social accounting, relatively little work seems to have been done so far on the extent to which they are actually used in complementary ways in practice. In this chapter, we have almost exclusively focused on the functioning of public purchasing policies and have only been able to draw upon our results to raise the question of their link as an important and exciting topic for future investigation.

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² The Stockholm Declaration (UNESCO, 1972) was in fact the first effort in the international community to focus on the environment. It was to be a pivotal point in the history of debates on sustainable development, because at this conference the G77 refused to accept any environmental declaration in which the environment took precedence over development priorities. Stockholm made the environment a legitimate cause for international attention, but also set forward an agenda whereby development and environmental protection would necessarily be linked.

³ The call to action did not go unheeded. The number of signatories had grown to over 275 by 2000 and currently includes 417 institutions of higher education. See http://www.ulsf.org/programs_talloires_signatories.html.

⁴ Total population of Canadian degree-granting institutions was compiled by consolidating data from the Association of Canadian Universities and Colleges (AUCC, 2009), the Globe and Mail’s 2009 “University Report Card” (Canadian University Report Card, 2010), Maclean’s magazine’s “Rankings” (Dwyer 2009), and the Canadian Association of University Business Officers’ “Financial Information of Universities and Colleges” (CAUBO, 2009).

⁵ Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (http://www.aucc.ca/policy/quick-facts_e.html).

⁶ As of 2009 there were 1,549,000 full-time and part-time undergraduate and graduate students. Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (http://www.aucc.ca/policy/quick-facts_e.html).

⁷ While our distinction between “large” and “small” universities is synthetic and the 25,000-student mark somewhat arbitrary, we are following here the practice of the Globe and Mail’s “University Report Card” in distinguishing the size of universities. Unlike the Globe and Mail, for simplicity we included “medium” universities (12,500 to 25,000 students) in the “small” university category.

⁸ Respondents to both the broad questionnaire and follow-up interviews were promised anonymity. Respondents from our interviews are cited as I1, I2, I3, etc.

⁹ Universities listed in the Maquila Solidarity Network’s (MSN) “No Sweat Policy” report as having implemented ethical purchasing policies or practices banning the purchasing of products from companies that engage in “sweat shop” production practices (<http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/nosweat/action>) (MSN 2008).

¹⁰ According to the latest list of signatories as posted on the Talloires Network Members website, as of October 2010 (http://www.aucc.ca/policy/quick-facts_e.html). Three of the five Canadian universities that are signatories were part of our sample.

¹¹ We excluded food services from the survey for pragmatic reasons. This area is generally dealt with by a different department, a fact which would likely have compromised the accuracy of the data and the response rate.

¹² In Ontario this also includes the Green Energy Act (2009). In Nova Scotia it includes commitments by public institutions to follow the Electronic Stewardship Plan, whereby there is a fee charged when electronic equipment is purchased to be applied to the subsequent costs of recycling these products at the end of their life and placing them into the proper waste stream.

¹³ This was a palpable frustration with the procurement managers we interviewed. Managers felt their universities could show real savings benefits from buying green if they had better ways of tracking long-term costs. Our purchasing manager interviewees, on the whole, felt that universities are too wrapped up in short-term cost considerations, which consequently shut out many green products.

¹⁴ The role of other universities in information exchange is not surprising given the fact that purchasing has become increasingly formalized in the university context. For example, in Nova Scotia, universities tender products together in what is called the “Interuniversity Services” program. In British Columbia, the provincial purchasing association, “The University and Colleges Purchasing Program,” and the regional “Western University Purchasing Association” play major roles in helping choose which sustainable products to purchase. This exchange of information is predominantly centred on the green or recycled content of printing or electronic products, rather than the application of broad sustainability programs within the university. Meetings (and networks emerging out) of the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO) also, according to our interviewees, were forums for exchanging information on products on a national basis.

¹⁵ From our own survey of PIRG websites.

¹⁶ For example, the Canadian Students Against Sweatshops held a national conference in 2006, while in 2008 ten Canadian universities and three colleges participated in the Canadian Students Fair Trade Network’s “Ethical Purchasing Policies: Activist School” at Trent University.

¹⁷ See, for example, the numerous sector and company-specific reports for firms supplying goods to universities available at the [Workers’ Rights Consortium \(2007\)](#), the Fair Labor Association (2010), and the [Ethical Trade Initiative \(2010\)](#). Other labour-rights organizations of note actively monitoring key products and companies’ labour practices include the Worldwide Responsible Apparel Production certification program, Social Accountability International and its SA8000 certification, and the Fair Wear Foundation.

¹⁸ According to the Fairtrade Foundation, over 120 universities and colleges in the UK have gone fair trade since 2003 ([Fairtrade Foundation, 2010](#)). Several universities in the U.S. have gone to 100 per cent Fair Trade, while over 300 campuses in the U.S. now sell fair trade coffee ([Fridell, 2007](#), p. 75; [United Students for Fair Trade, 2008](#)). In Canada, while many universities have fair trade coffee options, the University of British Columbia decided in 2007 to sell only fair trade coffee after consulting with a fourth-year science class that conducted a project on the issue (“UBC Moves to Fair Trade, ‘Ethical’ Coffee,” 2007). Public institutions’ procurement policies in both the U.S. and Canada, however, lag far behind their European counterparts ([Fridell, 2007](#), p. 75).

¹⁹ In the case of green issues, public policy seems to play a stronger role in the initiation of policies. This appeared to be the case in Nova Scotia and Ontario where there was pressure placed on universities to adopt provincial government sustainability policies.