

Opinion

From sustainability to regeneration

Universities as ecosystem actors in a transformation already underway

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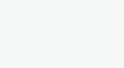
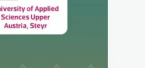
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For more than two decades, sustainability has shaped higher education’s agenda. Universities have embedded it into curricula, research priorities and institutional strategies, often aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. The Times Higher Education Impact Rankings, which now track 2,526 universities across 130 countries against the SDGs, in the 2022 edition states that 87 percent of institutions submitting data on SDG 17 reported sustainability-focused courses. The commitment, on paper, is unprecedented; and it has built something real: a generation of graduates, researchers and institutions fluent in the language of planetary limits and social responsibility. That foundation now needs to carry more weight. The 2025 Planetary Health Check classified seven of the nine boundaries – including the newly transgressed ocean acidification, with ocean acidity 30–40 percent above pre-industrial levels – as breached. That widening gap between institutional commitment and measurable outcomes has pushed a different vocabulary into the conversation: the regenerative economy. Where sustainability focuses on doing less harm, regenerative approaches set a more demanding bar – actively restoring ecological and social systems (Fullerton, 2015; Raworth, 2017). Universities are not being asked to abandon what they have built; they are being invited to grow through it.



The shift required is structural as well as rhetorical, and it is happening at multiple levels simultaneously. A regenerative transition requires moving from efficiency-driven models to systems thinking, where economic activity is understood as embedded within living ecological and social systems (Wahl, 2016). Universities have built reasonably solid sustainability competencies over the past two decades. What is emerging now is the next layer: from analysis to redesign, from describing systems to acting inside them. As Sterling (2013) argues, complex global problems call for transformative learning, in which students participate in systems rather than observe them from the outside. That shift in pedagogical philosophy is visible and accelerating across the sector. The first and most common response has been curricular. Courses on ESG, circular economy and responsible business are now standard, and they have built awareness and analytical skill (Lozano et al., 2017). Their gaps are also becoming clearer: most of this teaching remains organised around frameworks, indicators and evaluation tools. Students learn how to assess impact; the next challenge is learning to intervene in living systems over time. Naming that gap clearly is itself a sign of maturation – it means the field is ready to move forward. A second, more structural response has been moving to a collaborative and ecosystem-based approach – and it is perhaps the most promising signal of where the sector is heading. Regenerative challenges are systemic and cannot be addressed within the boundaries of a single institution, so universities are beginning to work alongside businesses, public administrations and civil society to co-create knowledge in context. European programmes have provided a testing ground for this model.



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Inside Erasmus+, the REGENU initiative – led by Ca’ Foscari University of Venice, under the scientific direction of the Venice School of Management (VSM), with eight partners across seven countries – has tried to embed regenerative principles into higher education by co-creating learning environments with entrepreneurs and local communities, rather than designing curricula in isolation. Urban GoodCamp (UCAMP), another Erasmus+ project where VSM participated, ran intensive challenge-based bootcamps in seven European cities – Madrid, Porto, Paris, Amsterdam, Venice, Helsinki and Ljubljana – pairing students and researchers with municipal actors and community organisations on concrete urban problems.

These experiences are a source of design intelligence for the next generation of programmes. UCAMP closed in 2023 having addressed twelve urban challenges with 180 participants and produced a free toolkit. REGENU’s 2024 Venice innovation challenge engaged 50 students across 12 teams on a complex urban regeneration question: how to generate value for a city that has fallen below 49,000 historic-centre residents – down from 174,808 in 1951, a roughly 72 percent decline – while absorbing more than 20 million visitors a year; with tourists outnumbering residents by up to 400 to 1 on peak days.



Some teams produced ideas that local actors found credible enough to pursue further. Others surfaced the limits of short academic cycles when confronted with long regenerative timeframes.

Both outcomes are instructive: the ecosystem learns from what works and from what reveals friction.

Pedagogy is a culturally significant area of movement. Experiential and challenge-based learning, drawing on Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory, is increasingly replacing lecture-led delivery. Students work on open problems with no predetermined solution, in negotiation with stakeholders who bring their own priorities and constraints. This shifts uncertainty from a bug to a feature of the learning environment rather than a problem to be eliminated.

Cities have become the natural laboratory for these approaches because they concentrate the tensions a regenerative economy has to hold – environmental pressure, social inequality, economic restructuring – and because they make complexity visible. Solutions have to be negotiated and not imposed. Treating the city as a living lab, in line with Wahl’s (2016) view of regenerative cultures, is more demanding than treating it as a case study, but it is also harder to govern.

Across these efforts, four tensions remain unresolved.

1. Regenerative initiatives are still fragmented, often tied to individual professors or grant cycles rather than embedded in institutional strategy.
2. The temporal mismatch between academic programmes and regenerative change is a genuine constraint, but it is also driving innovation in programme design: modular formats, community partnerships and longitudinal student engagement are all emerging responses.
3. The competencies regeneration requires – interdisciplinary thinking, relational skill, comfort with ambiguity – are still undervalued relative to technical disciplinary training (Lozano et al., 2017) but they are increasingly recognised and named, which is the precondition for making them core.
4. And the metrics problem is real: while sustainability has developed reasonably mature indicators, regenerative outcomes are systemic and qualitative; developing adequate measurement frameworks is an active area of research, not a closed question.

So, are universities designed for this transition? Probably not yet, but they are designing themselves for it, collaboratively and in real time. The shift visible in initiatives like REGENU and UCAMP is of a renegotiation of the university’s role in its wider ecosystem: less an external observer of change, more a participant and co-creator inside the systems it studies. That is a more demanding role.

The ecosystem is learning by doing, building institutional memory across projects and partnerships, and gradually shifting what a university is understood to be for. That process is underway. The question now is not whether it will happen, but how quickly the sector can make it durable.

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