



“Frameworks for Sustainability on Campus”

**Interviews with
Rachel Martin, Elsevier
&
Corey Peterson, University of Tasmania**

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KENNEALLY: Higher education institutions have led research on sustainability for many decades. Now, they are applying that same academic rigor to understand the environmental and social impact of their own operations and outputs.

Welcome to CCC’s podcast series. I’m Christopher Kenneally for Velocity of Content.

The United Nations’ 17 Sustainable Development Goals, adopted in 2015, address a range of important environmental and social challenges by stimulating global and collaborative action. With so much at stake for the SDGs, how do institutions ensure they select the right sustainability framework for them?

That’s the concern addressed in a new report from Elsevier, *Demystifying Sustainability Assessment*. The 50-page white paper examines six of the most popular frameworks that higher education institutions use. It also offers a step-by-step guide to help schools get started with their own self-assessments.

Rachel Martin, global director of sustainability at Elsevier, joins me from Amsterdam to explain why the science publisher undertook this analysis and how institutions stand to benefit from supporting sustainability frameworks. Rachel Martin, welcome back to the program.

MARTIN: Thanks so much, Chris. So happy to be here again.

KENNEALLY: Happy to have you join us as well, Rachel. Sustainable human activities use natural resources in ways that lessen their possible hazardous impact on the environment and on people. Rachel Martin, what role does Elsevier play in sustainability for higher education institutions?

MARTIN: That’s a great question, and I think it’s really important maybe if we start from the beginning. Sustainability is super-important. It’s important because society’s facing shockingly complex issues right now – global emergencies – and every day, it seems on



the news there's something new that we have to grapple with. So organizations such as Elsevier in terms of publishing and in terms of our products and services feel very passionately about sustainability, and we also see that our customers, our partners, our collaborators in higher education and beyond also see the importance of sustainability.

So our motivation for writing this is really to think about how we can come together and better understand the landscape of which sustainability is moving towards. It basically boils down to what you can measure, you can change. And of course, data is going to underpin our ability to not only understand where we are right now, but where we need to get to, and to understand what actions we can do along the way to help us accelerate those progresses.

And for higher education, that also makes a difference. Having reliable data – for example, looking at research output, but also looking at the symbiotic relationship universities have within the communities that they occupy.

We also see that university rankings, for example, are now looking at sustainability as a way of benchmarking or profiling universities' strengths. And there's a lot of different frameworks out there with different results. So we wanted to have a look at what are the frameworks out there, where are the commonalities and where are the differences, and what kind of considerations must universities try and think through when doing or participating in these types of framework systems?

KENNEALLY: The University of Tasmania in Australia and Elsevier have published the Tasmanian Societal Impact Model Playbook to help those institutions amplify the impact of their sustainability efforts. What lessons did the university learn that can help other institutions around the globe?

MARTIN: I think first and foremost, it was a really interesting collaboration. And it's a collaboration, so the Tasmanian Playbook has actually enabled us to go further with writing this white paper looking at a whole raft of different frameworks.

But if I take a step back, the collaboration between the University of Tasmania and Elsevier was super-interesting, because they came to us and they wanted to know, OK, what's our societal impact? Of course, we have data around research. We have data around policy citations – around patents, for example. But that collaboration took it one step further about how that data might help inform or influence the strategy which a university might actually adopt in order to accelerate and to embrace sustainable development. So it was a really interesting and great example of the symbiotic relationship between universities and the city or the country that they occupy.



Tasmania, for those who might not be familiar, is at the bottom of Australia, and they actually embarked in a wide general public survey to really understand the societal issues that people were concerned about – the Tasmanians themselves – and then to think about how the university might help address those issues or ensure that they had strengths in which they could complement and progress it.

KENNEALLY: Working on sustainability goals benefits the local environment. It can benefit the entire globe. But it also has benefits for the institutions themselves.

MARTIN: Definitely. I think Sustainable Development Goals are a way for us to think about societal impact. Like I said, we're experiencing climate change. So it's not just universities, but I think it's every organization across every sector that is now looking at, OK, climate change is really important. What are we doing? What's our contribution? Where do our strengths lie that you can lean in, and where can we minimize those weaknesses or work collaboratively to do that?

So having the Sustainable Development Goals be a framework by which we could sort of think about that – think about impact through the lens where we're looking at people and we're looking at planet is incredibly impactful and certainly something that will help us address those really complex societal challenges.

KENNEALLY: In remarks last week in New York at the 2023 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared the SDGs aren't just a list of goals. They carry the hopes, dreams, rights, and expectations of people everywhere. Yet today, he said only 15% of the targets are on track, and many are going in reverse. Rachel Martin, do you share this pessimism? And if not, how would you try to persuade Secretary-General Guterres to be more upbeat?

MARTIN: I think anybody who knows me knows that I'm an incredibly optimistic person. I think the Sustainable Development Goals have gone on a journey.

So I'm encouraged to see the SDG Publishers Compact, for example, spurring a whole raft of new sustainability people in a similar job to myself to really drive and transform change through the organizations. And I increasingly see that in universities. There's new sustainability directors that I have met – passionate, wonderful people who are thinking about their local cities, who are working with these amazing ideas of decarbonizing their buildings, thinking about research programs, and it's really exciting.

I have a really strong optimism for the future, and I think we need to be building on this, collaborating. SDG number 17 is all about partnerships for the goals. And we can really pool our resources together. I hope that by demystifying the sustainability frameworks, we



can come back this time next year at the High-Level Political Forum and think about how we can actually have said that we have moved the needle. Time is precious, and I truly believe that we can do that, and we can do that with higher education and in partnership.

KENNEALLY: Rachel Martin, global director of sustainability at Elsevier, thank you for speaking with me.

MARTIN: It's been a pleasure as always, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Corey Peterson, chief sustainability officer for the University of Tasmania, welcome to Velocity of Content.

PETERSON: Thanks, Chris, for having me here. Happy to be invited.

KENNEALLY: What part do institutions like the University of Tasmania play in achieving global sustainability goals?

PETERSON: I guess one needs to understand what universities are in the world. We have a very unique role. We have a lot in common with other businesses and organizations. But we predominantly across the sector have that added social mission built into what we do, teaching and research. We were set up often as the original benefit corporations, if you will – 1,200 years of history that we have baked into our DNA through our establishment in public legislation or even private charters that we are here to discover and share knowledge for the betterment of our local communities and obviously through our sectoral connections for the world. And I would posit that we should also seek to be exemplars of sustainability ourselves in our operations.

KENNEALLY: Corey Peterson, tell us about the commitment that the University of Tasmania has made to sustainability goals. What should we know about the university and about Tasmania that have informed this commitment?

PETERSON: Well, Tasmania's a relatively small island state of Australia. Being an island, we're hyperaware of the situation we find ourselves in, our context. We're aware of our environment, equity of our society, etc. And that plays into everything that we do as the University of Tasmania. We're the only university represented on the island, so therefore we sort of need to be everything to everyone on the island. We have campuses in all the regions. Therefore we feel that we are intimately connected to the island, and therefore we need to be exemplars, as I said earlier, in our sustainability in and of ourselves, but also to help the island itself be more sustainable. And for being that, we can be an exemplar for the world.



KENNEALLY: Higher education organizations like the University of Tasmania can choose from a variety of frameworks to support the commitment to sustainability. How do you assess the competing frameworks, and which one of them won out?

PETERSON: That's a really good question. We went through a good year and a half discussion within the university and with our stakeholders and our broader community about the impacts that we want to have as a university on our island, and like I said, be globally relevant. Therefore, once we identified clearly the impacts that we wanted to have in Tasmania, we were able to look at the various metrics available specifically to the higher education sector. So we did look at things like the Global Reporting Index (sic) and things like that, but we wanted something that was developed by and for the higher education sector that said my peers across universities around the world say this is what makes a sustainable university.

At the end of the day, we settled on STARS, which is Sustainability Tracking, Assessment, and Rating System. It is a fully transparent system. Every bit of information you put out to justify why you think you should get the credit or that rating is publicly available to anybody, not just those that subscribe to STARS. So you could go on and look at every bit of information we put up there. The idea of that is we can go see, and others can see what we've done to better the sector as a whole. So somebody's doing something great. Share that out there and let others emulate it.

It's also a continuous improvement tool, so what was innovative at one time – in the next iteration of the tool, that becomes business as usual that all universities are expected to do or undertake, and then that next level of innovation comes in. So it leads to continuous improvement.

The other one – because we also very much talk about Sustainable Development Goals as an organizing thought for us on how we go about that impact, we decided to participate in the Times Higher Education Impact Rankings as well, because that is specifically aligned to each SDG. Unfortunately, it's not as transparent. It's not as upfront. The information you put up there is behind a firewall. That's why we chose both, so that we were very clear to the sector and to the broader community about what we're saying we're doing. Obviously, you want to participate in rankings for benchmarking as well, as it is quite helpful.

KENNEALLY: For schools like yours, participation in a sustainability framework demands significant investment in time and resources. How confident was everyone at the University of Tasmania that you'd made the right choice?



PETERSON: As I said, we had quite an iteration around the impact areas. So we do have full executive-level support, because I was very clear about those two tools and why we were choosing them. And then I suppose what solidified this over time was we were able to demonstrate what we were doing well as reflected in the metrics and what needed more work to improve on our rating and ranking, which was very clear to our senior leaders and decision-makers that that aligned with what they were doing in the university and what they thought could be done better. Therefore, we were able to focus in on those. That validated the metrics that we had chosen.

KENNEALLY: The University of Tasmania achieved a STARS silver rating in 2020, becoming the first university in the Australasia region with that distinction. In 2022, UTAS rose to a gold rating. Since then, a new set of initiatives have been introduced to support your aim to achieve a platinum rating in 2025. So which areas are the focus of this latest and very ambitious undertaking?

PETERSON: And it truly is ambitious, Chris. There are 12 universities that have achieved platinum out of the hundreds, if not 1,000, universities that use the STARS system. We have what we call a pathway to platinum that does focus on a few areas, as you said, where we do need a bit more work. Those would include such as embedding sustainability further into our curriculum, which is what we're hearing from the students and what they want to see as well. We're also mapping our offerings to the SDGs so the students can interrogate our courses in units to target their studies. While they may have a major in sustainability or one particular area of science or social justice, they can actually focus into particular SDGs as well for their electives, and they can interrogate that curriculum online, or they can look in the course guides, because they're printed in there as well.

And we're also working on strengthening our peer-to-peer education programs, and that's for both students and staff so they can more directly contribute to our overall sustainability efforts.

And then there's obviously always room for improvement in operational areas such as energy supply efficiencies, waste management, catering, transport. And then finally strengthening our fossil fuel divestment, which we achieved in 2021, but we're adding a positive streaming as well for contributions to advancing the SDGs, including the needed fast-tracked energy transition we're all seeking.

KENNEALLY: Rachel Martin with Elsevier told me earlier that she was more upbeat in her assessment of progress toward achieving the SDGs than UN Secretary-General António Guterres who said only 15% of the targets are on track, and many are going in reverse. Corey Peterson, what about you, do you share this pessimism?



PETERSON: Well, I'm an *apocaloptimist*, so that is – I understand the dire warnings. I understand that things can get worse, and probably to a certain extent will. But I also do firmly believe humanity is at its best when it's up against a significant threat. We tend to rise to the occasion and can manage change more fully then. It's at this point we just need to be minimizing the suffering and the negative impacts.

So I agree with him. Yes, we are not on track. But I also think that we do stand a chance, hence the optimist part of implacable optimist.

KENNEALLY: Corey Peterson, chief sustainability officer for the University of Tasmania, thank you for joining me today.

PETERSON: Thanks, Chris.

KENNEALLY: That's all for now. Our producer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. You can subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts, and please do follow us on Twitter and on Facebook. You can also find Velocity of Content on YouTube as part of the CCC channel. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening.

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