

COPY BUT DON'T PASTE:
**FROM STUDENT-LED TO COLLABORATIVE ACTION FOR
SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Can the experiences gained at Cemus somehow be converted so as to expand the debate – and moreover, can these experiences be shared and spread to universities in other parts of the world? ... How should the university be changed? What is education for? How will Cemus continue to contribute to a sustainable and just society?

Niclas Hällström, co-founder of Cemus (in Hald, 2010)

The Center for Environment and Development Studies (Cemus) is a student-initiated and primarily student-led university center, straddling the two universities (Uppsala University and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) in the town of Uppsala, Sweden. Since its inception in the early 1990s, the center has initiated and expanded the space for transdisciplinary, collaborative higher education as well as research and collaboration that transcends traditional academic disciplines and boundaries between academia and society at large. Based on the idea that the young people of today are key stakeholders of the future, Cemus has for over two decades acted as a platform for students to shape their own education and future, and has also become a creative and international meeting place for the larger university community to discuss and grapple with some of the most pressing sustainability challenges of our time.

The courses at Cemus are organized and led by students, usually recruited from the current pool of students at Cemus, which are hired on a 9-month project-basis as course coordinators. (For a list of current courses, visit www.cemus.uu.se.) Mainly working in pairs of two, the course coordinators lead the process of planning, running and evaluating each course, and do so in close partnership with a selected multidisciplinary group of researchers and teachers as well as practitioners and educational developers. The educational model that has emerged over the years has resulted in a creative and experimental learning environment that continuously seeks to improve the quality of higher education, both within Cemus and at the university at large.

In the last few years Cemus has had an increased collaboration with a number of new partners, both within and outside the university, nationally and internationally. Lasting 3 years, and spanning a range of activities, Action for Sustainability in

Higher Education in the Nordic Countries (ActSHEN) has been the most comprehensive of these international collaborations that Cemus has been involved in. This paper explores the impact and value of ActSHEN upon activities at Cemus, as well as, the role of Cemus in the ActSHEN project, based on reflections from students and staff that participated in ActSHEN.

ActSHEN AT CEMUS

With ActSHEN, Cemus' educational model and ethos has for the first time been placed into an international context in a systematic way, where it has been analyzed, scrutinized and compared to other approaches, as well as drawn upon as an inspiration in creating spaces for students to take an active role in shaping higher education and collaborative action for sustainability within other institutions. Cemus staff – both course coordinators as well as core team members – have, in different capacities, actively engaged in ActSHEN activities throughout the project. Likewise, ActSHEN members have been frequent visitors to Cemus and Uppsala – acting as critical friends, supervisors, guest lecturers, educational developers or as observers and participants in activities at Cemus as part of the process of developing their own pilot projects.

The activities at Cemus within ActSHEN were not designed as pilot-initiatives in the same way as at other participating institutions, as it already represented an established model of student-led higher education. Nonetheless, Cemus staff seem to have drawn significant meaning and inspiration from participation in activities and the interaction with other ActSHEN members. Through a number of critical friend visits, ActSHEN members have also influenced the educational design and planning of a number of courses offered by Cemus. For a longer description of one such course, see the article by Grandin, Gunnarsson & Andersson (2016). Other courses influenced directly by critical friend visits include two different courses on the theme Climate Change Leadership (one a campus course and the other a Massive Open Online Course). Likewise, Cemus seems to have served as an example for comparison and inspiration for other ActSHEN members, which is also reflected in the alignment between the Helsinki principles and descriptions commonly made about Cemus' education and organization.

The sections below are built around reflections from Cemus' employees on their engagement with ActSHEN, as well as ActSHEN members' experiences with Cemus, and the impact it has had on their work.

VOICES FROM CEMUS

Several Cemus employees that participated in the ActSHEN project expressed an appreciation of having an international network of colleagues that also were interested in exploring new approaches within higher education. As one course coordinator (Hannes Willner) at Cemus who had attended an ActSHEN meeting in Iceland to act as a critical friend expressed it:

It has been good to see that there are others [beside Cemus] who think a little different about education [...]. To know that we are not alone in what we are trying to do and to have such a competent network to connect to has really been a source of inspiration.

Another course coordinator (Alexis Engström), who participated and organized several ActSHEN related events in Uppsala throughout the project, appreciated the level of critical scrutiny and external review that ActSHEN members brought to Cemus:

ActSHEN has been an interesting project as it has, from my understanding, been thoroughly inspired by, as well as containing a critical approach to, what Cemus does. It has been very helpful to have student led education reviewed from the eyes of people who have very high ambitions but are not blindsided by the notion that all student involvement is good involvement.

The same course coordinator (Alexis Engström) also felt that the engagement with ActSHEN members led to a higher degree of *self-reflexivity* in his educational design and practice:

[...] the engagement within the ActSHEN network has helped me better understand why I do certain things, to do more of the things I believe in and to avoid other things they have pointed out as potential weaknesses. It is important to remember that there ought to be a very good reason for everything that you do within higher education, and to have help in critically evaluating if your practice is based on the best of your knowledge or if it's has become part of a routine.

Through the ActSHEN project, another course coordinator at Cemus (Friederike May) found an educational design researcher from the University of Helsinki (Veli-Matti Vesterinen) to supervise her Master's thesis (May, 2015). She appreciates that their collaboration and discussions were "*in line with the questions and principles ActSHEN was supposed to work with*" but it also helped her work at Cemus. She continues:

While the cooperation [...] definitely brought about the exchange of different ways of teaching and learning regarding sustainability issues, I was then also able to directly implement what I've learned in the courses I work with at Cemus. This had to do with the content of the thesis as well, where I was looking to [...] develop a workshop series that was going to run throughout the course and thus tie together different threads of the course.

VOICES FROM ActSHEN PARTNERS

Students and faculty from the University of Helsinki visited Cemus twice in relation to planning a new student-led course on sustainability, inspired by Cemus. Reflecting on this experience, one of the involved course coordinators (Jaana Herranen) highlights the importance of discussions, feedback and inspiration in the process of developing a student-led course for the first time:

In the visits we had interesting discussion with the Cemus-group for example on the assessment and quality of student-led courses. Being in contact with Cemus has

increased my understanding on issues related to sustainability. [...] Students have learned through discussions and reflections, and they have appreciated the feedback [Cemus has] given them on their course plans.

As also expressed by several staff at Cemus, she also emphasizes the value and importance of having a collegial network of support:

The people in Cemus have always been inspiring and really nice, which has been one of the driving forces in the project. Also students have visited Cemus and they have enjoyed being around with similar-minded people with same kind of goals. It is important to feel to be part of something bigger!

Other ActSHEN members that engaged with Cemus during the project highlighted the didactic and pedagogic value of having an established form of student-led, collaborative higher education to compare and contrast their own pilot-initiatives and educational practice against. A researcher and educator from the University of Iceland (Susan Gollifer) states, in relation to providing space for student-led learning in their courses:

[...] the influence of Cemus on the pilot initiatives that I am working on, which do not have an explicit sustainability content, was focused on providing students a space to explore their role in their own learning. Having worked previously with student-centred pedagogy, it was easy to focus on student-driven teaching and learning processes within the context of a conventional higher education course, but the Cemus model led me to question the important nuances between the terms student-centred, student-led, student initiated and student driven, and on the need to address institutional and organisational structures.

Institutional and organizational structures, as both enablers and barriers to action for sustainability in higher education, were discussed at an early stage in the ActSHEN project. They were however not addressed to the same extent throughout the project, but the experience of challenges continuously facing Cemus seemed to an extent have kept these questions alive within the project. The same researcher (Susan Gollifer) continues:

We can always experiment with sustainability pedagogy in terms of content and process, but this has limited impact in terms of pursuing the goals of sustainability education and reflecting the core principles that we have discussed throughout the project. Cemus provided a sound model because it is not a perfect model but rather a realistic one that reflects the challenges, the constraints, the contradictions and the complexity of addressing sustainability through higher education. Its organic nature is constrained by influential institutional hierarchies and systems, however, for this reason, it has provided a model that can be shared with students enrolled in and colleagues working on the International Studies in Education Programme. Cemus is therefore a key element in a collaborative project that no one knows where it will take us, but we do know [...] is underlined by multiple interpretations of student-led and the need to address the implications of these on the pedagogical and the institutional systems we are working with.

Other ActSHEN members also seemed to have appreciated the tensions and interesting questions raised by having an institutionalized student-led example such as Cemus in the project. An art educator and researcher from the Iceland Academy of Arts (Jan van Boeckel), who participated in one of the ActSHEN meetings, expressed it this way:

I very much enjoyed [...] the spiritedness and enthusiasm that Cemus representatives brought along, and their eagerness, for example, to explore more fully how the dimension of “student-led” could be deepened and expanded. For me the discussions on the dialectic tension between ‘teacher-initiated’ versus ‘student-based’ (in an educational setting in which sustainability is thematized) were very meaningful. What changes in the point of departure, when an element of ‘not-knowing’ (open-endedness) is brought in by a teacher, compared to engaging in a process that works towards certain predetermined outcomes, such as contributing to sustainability intentionally in a more controlled, step-by-step process?

The same researcher and educator from the University of Iceland (Susan Gollifer), as quoted previously, concludes with a reflection on the reciprocal nature that learning in a project such as ActSHEN can take:

What Cemus offers us is experience of having explored, implemented, reflected, and continual growth informed by learning. We can therefore become part of this process and share our experiences of working in a very different context that can also challenge Cemus to think outside of the box, as it has led us to do in our own institution.

FROM STUDENT-LED TO COLLABORATIVE HIGHER EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY

Perhaps one of the most important and overarching outcomes for Cemus in the ActSHEN project, has been the opportunity of setting our education in an international and multi-institutional context, where critical input from other project-partners have helped to clarify and understand what various forms of collaborative and student-led higher education for sustainability may entail and require. ActSHEN has also challenged Cemus to expand the discussion and practice of who participates in the creation of its courses in terms of both content and form – that is – going beyond the student-led dimension of hiring students as course coordinators to actually including all students in a course in the educational design process. Furthermore, the ActSHEN project has helped to elucidate the importance of understanding how concepts and ideas about student-led education are understood by different actors in the institutional landscape of higher education, and that other terms (such as collaborative learning or student-faculty partnerships) at times might be more appropriate to capture the ambition of certain educational activities.

In relation to the aim of the ActSHEN project, to explore ways to expand action for sustainability in higher education in the Nordic countries, one of the most interesting processes to follow has been to see the various forms that student-led (and collaborative) education has taken when it has been translated into a number of

different institutional and pedagogical contexts, and how these various initiatives then have cross-pollinated and influenced each other.

Over the years, there have been many discussions between students and staff that have been active within Cemus, on how the experiences gained at Cemus could inform and support the development of similar initiatives at other institutions of higher education worldwide. The past few years have actually seen a significant increase in such initiatives. What ActSHEN has made clear is the importance of understanding and thinking through how ideas and models of higher education can be introduced and tested in new institutional contexts: to copy can be great, but think before you paste.

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