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Article

Sustainability Alumni at Work—Interviews on Educated Sustainability Professionalism

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Abstract: Education is widely recognized as a key ingredient in furthering society-wide sustainability transformation. Although there has been extensive research on higher education for sustainability, the qualitative outcomes of sustainability-focused education are less robustly interrogated. As more students graduate from sustainability-specific programmes, it should be asked: what kind of professionals are they and how do they operationalise sustainability at their work? This paper studied career paths and professionalism in the emerging professional field of sustainability, using semi-structured, in-depth interviews of 19 alumni of a master's level sustainability-specific programme. The interview results reveal that professionalism in sustainability is based on ideals that appear to oppose or conflict the norms and values of several fields in which sustainability is applied. The results also show that the professionals often face challenges in practising sustainability in the workplace but have found strategies to manage these challenges. Finally, the alumni suggested that the sustainability profession is poised between being a specialisation orientation in other recognised fields and a generalist approach that takes sustainability itself as the specialisation practicable in several different fields.

Keywords: sustainability education; sustainability professionals; professional identity; professional field

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1. Introduction

Sustainability science is an evolving academic field that is on track to emerge into a freestanding discipline [1]. However, rather than being bound by a single academic field, sustainability science can be seen as an academic take on the non-academic principle of sustainability itself. This allows for a quite inclusive definition of sustainability science, and perhaps it is better defined by the issues it aims to treat than just the disciplines it employs [2]. It is often situated as a field between different sciences [3] and stands as an interdisciplinary field producing knowledge aimed at sustainability transformation [4]. Several educational programmes have emerged with sustainability as an orientation and focus [5], ranging from field-specific programmes that deal with sustainability issues to programmes that more directly focus on sustainability. The second type of programme can be described as employing sustainability science in the form of a free-standing, educational, and scientific discipline [6]. The sustainability science of these programmes often focuses on human–environment dynamics [7], in a strongly contextualised manner [8], with a deliberate aim for transformation [9]. These programmes typically study and treat real-world problems from an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective, using the principles of sustainability to structure sustainability education [10].

Sustainability science education is considered transformative from multiple perspectives, for example, as it aims to produce graduates that are agents of change. It also utilises transformative pedagogies [11], nurtures transformative competencies [12], and produces graduates that in turn disperse into different professional fields aiming to further create transformation in society at large [ibid.]. Competencies and expected learning outcomes

are well-researched, especially from the point of view of what capabilities sustainability professionals should have [13–16]. Yet, sustainability, even while well addressed at higher education institutions and in research on teaching [5], is still a relatively new field at the master's level, especially as the focus of a degree. Therefore, this study examines the employment paths of a sustainability programme's alumni, not only in technical terms, such as job titles, but also in the quality of the employment of their sustainability competencies, and the identities that emerge through their studies and work. I consider their quality of employment in terms of its correlation with their education and personal expectations.

Professional identity is an intersectional concept, consisting of personally and professionally value-laden attributes, including ideals, goals, and motivations [17]. Apart from these classifications of what constitutes an identity, identity is often seen as a part of another whole, for example, as a component of a professional agency [18], or another process, such as becoming a professional [19]. Additionally, it can be treated as a developing psycho-social complex, such as in the education of a pre-professional identity [20]. However, in studies of professionals, professional identities, professional agents, and so forth, the professional identity presents a knowledge gap, insofar as its role and function as a foundational element guiding one's professional acts [21] within a field where it is employed for sustainability. This paper observes that professionals of sustainability—the professional subjects [22]—in the context where they exercise their professionalism might present some friction or incompatibilities that are similarly unknown. Thus, in offering some insight to fill this gap, this research took a group of alumni, who graduated from a sustainability-focused master's programme, as representatives of the field of sustainability professionals, specifically educated for sustainability. This group of professionals of sustainability approach their professionalism from an education-led development process, which enables the analyses of different socio-cultural conditions within the different workplaces of these alumni. The interviews shed light on the dimensions of professional agents, as educated, practising professionals of sustainability. To bring out these themes, I asked the following questions:

- 1) What kind of professional identities exist among the alumni?
- 2) What kind of competencies are required by their positions?
- 3) How do the alumni operationalize sustainability in their workplaces?

2. Theoretical Approach

I utilised a professional agency framework as the analytical lens of this study and adopted a conceptualisation of the professional subject within the theory as elaborated by Eteläpelto et al., 2013 [23]. A focus on agency and agents was chosen for its relevance in actions geared towards change [24], which are one defining aim of the practice of sustainability. Given the specific scope of agency on purposeful actions, it is no wonder that agency theory has been utilised in sustainability research [25–27]. The framework utilised herein leans on the underlying dimension of the professional subject—whether they are a professional or professional agent. These dimensions, per the categorisation of Eteläpelto et al. [23], are the professional identity, professional knowledge/competencies, and professional history and experiences of the professional agents insofar as they exercise their agency through the “socio-cultural conditions of the workplace” [ibid.]. Professional identity consists of many elements, including ideals, goals, motivations, and interests, and it is closely related to the values of professionals—both work-related and personal [28]—where knowledge and competencies, as well as the professionals' work experience, are considered to be resources and qualities of the professionals.

Through the combination of subject, agency, and workplace, I see subjects as being as closely tied to the element of agency as they are to professionalism. Thus, with the expert interviews, I considered the educated professionals of sustainability simply as professional agents—innately related specifically to the professional agency (exercised for a certain purpose) [ibid.]. I considered their knowledge and competencies as an outcome of

their education, work history, and experience as part of the educational and professional path of agents. Considering the professional agents' underlying dimensions in this study, I first looked at their professional identity. Professional identity is a value-laden conceptualisation that is simultaneously self-defined and self-narrated [29]. Yet, it is developed in education through attained knowledge and engagement with a knowledge community, translating into a pre-professional identity [18], and ultimately reflected through the interaction and perception of others [30]. Altogether, the dimensions under the professional subject, such as identity, competencies, and experience, are interlinked and dynamic, as they co-develop in practice.

I looked at identity as continually developing and dynamic but based on a foundation that is personal and value-driven. This identity is reflected and defined by oneself through interaction and engagement with other subjects, knowledge, experiences, and identities, that are exercising other aims, in the context of the workplace. The second underlying dimension is the knowledge and competencies of the professional subject. I looked at this dimension as closely related to the education–work praxis in which pre-professional identities are developed through education [23] and those created elements of professionalism are practised at work, in different real-life situations. Competencies, which have often been the research focus of sustainability education [13–16], can be seen as profoundly important to being a professional, which is often defined as being an operational complex of knowledge, skills, and attitudes [31]. Rather than overlapping, I observed attitudes towards connecting one's identity and skills as specifically developed through different modes of practice, such as in one's professional experience.

The final dimension of professional history and experience I looked at was the path to work of the professionals and especially the moment at which studying turned into work. However, it should be noted that this was not looked at in isolation but as interconnected dimensions under the definition of professional agents. In other words, this is the manifestation of the professionals' history of studying being turned into work experience [32]. My interest in this dimension lies in the lived experiences of navigating one's way through education to work and I see this dimension through the unbound interaction with the socio-cultural conditions of the workplace [23]. I consider this to be indicative of the unique paths to experiences and a reflection of the socio-cultural conditions of a generalised workplace—perhaps most compelling, is this reflects the field wherein these professionals perceive they work most specifically.

3. Materials and Methods

The thematic, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 alumni of the sustainability science-oriented master's programme, Creative Sustainability (CS) at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland, founded in 2010. The 2-year programme brought together students from the four general fields of design, business, built environment, and architecture (the structure of the programme, which was mainly determined by the participating disciplines and departments, has since changed):

“The Master's Degree Programme in Creative Sustainability brings together students from different fields to study in multidisciplinary teams, increasing their understanding of different disciplines and enabling holistic approaches. This activates students to create new sustainable solutions for the human, urban, industrial and business environment. The pedagogical approach is based on integrating teaching and research, problem-based and blended learning and a strong connection to practical outcomes.”
(<http://acs.aalto.fi/masters-programme>, accessed 19 February 2020).

It is interesting to note that classical disciplinary divides were in effect to an extent even in such an interdisciplinary programme, as they served the structural purposes for degree granting. Studies in the programme were structured such that the whole of the cohort study joint modules concentrated specifically on sustainability for the first part of the master's programme, while the latter part consisted of selected courses and a master's

thesis. The programme explicitly states the use of a multidisciplinary approach, and claims design thinking, sustainability management, and project management as the programme's intended learning outcomes (Creative Sustainability website 19 February 2020).

Although the fields represented in the CS programme were oriented towards applied sciences, the systems approach, interdisciplinarity, and transdisciplinarity of the programme, through strong contextualisation and collaborations, orient it as a sustainability science programme [10]. The programme's studies are divided into four main types: (1) compulsory joint studies in which all students participate; (2) compulsory studies based on the core department of an individual's focus area; (3) alternative CS studies wherein students have cross-department mobility; and (4) elective studies wherein students can exercise their mobility across the university, and other national and international universities. In addition to these dimensions, the programme has a strong focus on sustainability practices and the career prospects of its graduates, even as they move on to their professional careers (Creative Sustainability website 19 February 2020).

The 19 interviewees represented several cohorts of the CS programme: from the creation of the programme in 2010 to students enrolled in 2017. All interviewees graduated between 2012 and 2019. The interviewees ranged in professional and disciplinary fields, with 9 from design, 5 from business and management, 4 from built environment, and 1 from architecture studies. In addition to these variables, the cultural backgrounds of the programme participants varied with 10 interviewees self-identified as Finnish and 9 as non-Finnish. Their reasons for applying to a sustainability-focused programme varied. To one, the programme seemed like a gateway to Aalto University, while to another, it was about attaining a formal education on sustainability. However, to most of the interviewees, the programme's strong focus on sustainability was the decisive reason to apply. The programme was seen primarily as an exploration of the general topic, as the interviewees did not necessarily have a clear vision of the career into which this education would lead. The fields in which the alumni have continued post-graduation are diverse, representing consultancy work, doctoral studies, construction industry, and employment and education services, among others. There were no identical careers, or study trajectories, even if they originated in the same compulsory joint studies (Figure 1).

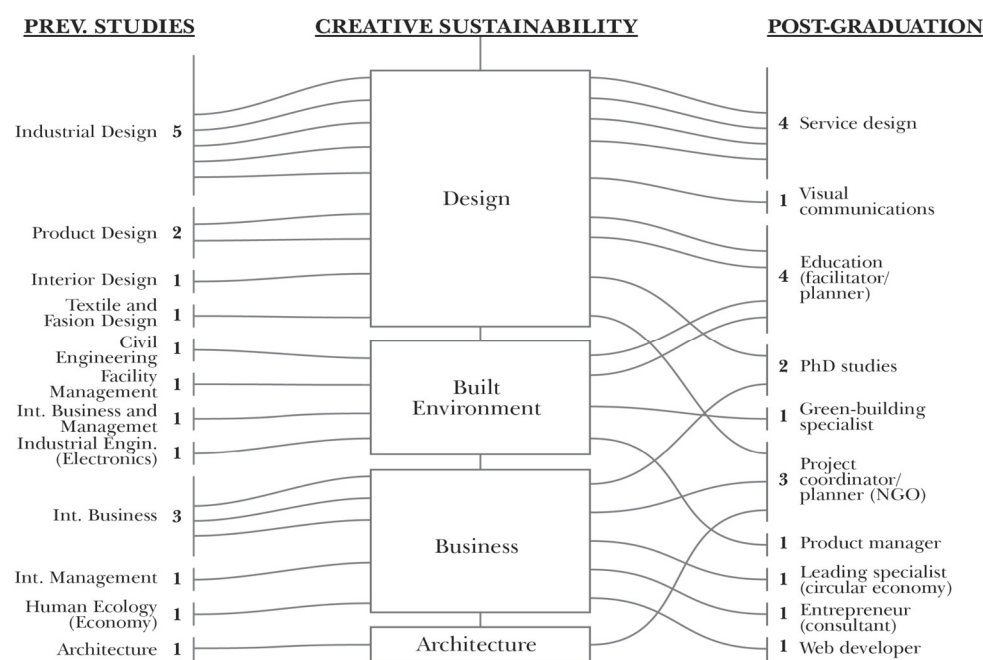


Figure 1. Alumni study-to-career paths from their previous studies to their common CS programme to their post-graduation positions.

The corresponding author is also a graduate of the programme and was enrolled in the inaugural class of the programme in 2010. The author comes from a background in design. Familiarity with the topics under investigation served to deepen the understanding of the broader research context [33] in an insider and expert interviewer setting. This common background facilitated the development of a shared understanding of the relevance of the topics at hand [34], although it should be noted that the individual interviewees were predominantly previously unknown to the author.

The interviewees were mainly recruited through an alumni network post seeking volunteers to take part in this research. However, to secure wider representation, some interviewees were invited to create a non-probabilistic sample group. The interviews took place between August and December 2019 and were predominantly held in-person. Three interviews out of 19 took place remotely via audio or video call. The interviews ranged from 1 hour and 15 minutes to over 4 hours, and were audio recorded with extensive notes taken during the interviews [35]. The interviews revolved around the following three topics which were presented as question themes to the interviewees:

- The interviewees' previous studies, particular experiences during their master's studies, and career developments from internships to post-graduation and current positions;
- The interviewees' work (including their responsibilities, functions, and identity) in their current positions and organisations, ventures, and projects, and those relevant to their career prospects;
- The interviewees' perceptions of and reflections on the field of sustainability professionals, and if they acknowledged that there is such a field, what they thought are some of its general features.

An interview memo was written throughout the interview stage of the study to document the emerging themes and key findings, and join them to the reflections on the research questions. The individual interview notes and interview memo were used in a content analysis focusing on common emergent themes under the three research questions [36]. The interviewees brought up a wide range of topics, as they worked in various positions, fields, and were at differing stages in their careers. The interview analysis was framed through the theory of professional agency. As mentioned in the previous section, a professional subject under the general conceptualisation of professional agency, is inter-linked and dynamic, and thus, the analytical lens was contextually specific. This meant that rather than operating by strict boundaries, the different analytical dimensions and their themes were treated as they emerged in the real-life practices being discussed. Thus, the results focus on seminal themes reappearing through the three different interview areas, which were developed as the main result of the study with the analytical framing [37]. In the following Section 4, the alumni's educations and their specific programmes are addressed but predominantly as a shared reference and a matter of development along their professional paths, as this study does not aim to assess the specific programmes in detail.

4. Results

The results are introduced in the next three sections following the analytical framing of a professional subject—that is, the actor in professional agency theory. The results look at the dimensions of identity, competency, and experience; however, in the real-world practice of agency, these dimensions overlap. Thus, the interview findings and the following content analysis are presented as contextualised rather than divided by the methodology.

4.1. Development of a Professional Identity

The alumni exhibited a strong motivation to attain a career in sustainability. This motivation compelled them to gather more knowledge and expertise in the subject, but also to obtain certified expertise in the field. In relation to the alumni's study paths, some utilised their sustainability education to extend or refine their previous studies, such as in

architecture, with a specialisation in sustainability. Others took the programme as a fully new direction and field altogether, for example, a sustainability specialist with a background in design. The motivation to work with sustainability was often rooted in personal values and worldviews, which, in addition to studies and work, had influenced several different sustainability-centred acts, such as volunteering, selection of a specific thesis topic, lifestyle choices, and so on. The ethos of an ideal sustainability was the impression left on the alumni of what the professional field entailed; this ideal meant foremost the priority of sustainability among other decision-making drivers, and sustainability as a balance between environmental, socio-cultural, and economic development. As Interviewee #5 stated, the professional identity in sustainability through its ideals and ideologies was seemingly developed in a bubble as the *"businesses in the real-world and real-field think of these things very differently"*. This theme emerged in several interviews, and often led the alumni to ponder whether professionals of sustainability ought to lean on the ideals of an imagined, ideal *sustainable world*, or should the ethos be based on the current *unsustainable world*? In practice, the alumni saw these two to be dichotomic; sustainability could be implemented as systemic and transformative, and thus deep, or as a rather shallow, reformative, and reductionistic implementation. The latter interpretation was perceived to be a better fit to the current level of comprehension and the requirements of sustainability in the real world. Interviewee #7 reflected that basing their professional perception on the current societal and organisational comprehension of the extent and possibilities of sustainability would be problematic, since *"they don't necessarily know what they need"*.

Several alumni now work in fields in which they employ their sustainability expertise rather than the expertise gained from their studies before the interdisciplinary programme (Figure 1). Thus, some alumni work in positions not typical of their disciplinary orientation, such as working for a non-governmental organisation as a project coordinator, even though they have a bachelor's degree in business. Another example is working in sustainability education, though the bachelor's degree is in industrial design. However, some alumni seemed to have had a clearer path that was more typically aligned with their studies, for example, a green-building specialist with undergraduate studies in industrial engineering. However, in either case, the goal to further sustainability as a practice was the guiding element, both in their studies with the programme and their following career choices. As Interviewee #11 explained: *"You have your values and it's up to you to find the ways to exercise them. Values are the background and what others see is the ways to exercise them, what are you selling and what should you show out."* The interdisciplinary, sustainability-focused identity has proven to be somewhat incompatible, or poorly understood, in different work contexts. Values appear to be the underlying dimension that is most likely to appear incompatible or cause confusion for employers. The interviewees predominantly defined their profession by the meaning it aims to convey (i.e., the intent to drive sustainability). In their organisations, positions, or projects, this also led to a level of frustration among the alumni. In their respective organisations, a deeper implementation of sustainability was sometimes perceived as an unnecessary and overly complex or even useless approach. It was also suggested that a sustainability approach was seen as too novel or potentially radical, for example, Interviewee #2 said, *"There is no benchmark or analogue with which you can show the [needed] work, no budget or time estimation on what is needed for the change"*. In general, there was a recognition among the alumni, that as the field of sustainability is emerging and constantly evolving, professionals accept that they are pioneers of something novel and potentially transformative, both in the issues addressed by sustainability, but also in generating a more fundamental change in their working contexts. There was a general belief that they are the best candidates, given their positions and context, to drive sustainability. However, as noted by several interviewees, those positions or specific organisations and fields that focus directly on sustainability are rare or seemingly non-existent.

However, another perspective discussed was that any approach to sustainability is also rooted in a certain perspective, whereas people from other cultures might think of sustainability differently. This led to further discussion of and reflection on the potential for multiplicity in the interpretation(s) of sustainability, which influences the practice of sustainability. Thus, this mismatch of ideals was seen as inevitable, although there was an articulation of hope that this mismatch would diminish over time as the comprehension of sustainability deepened in broader society. Much of the discussion on practising sustainability in the several different fields represented by the interviewees revolved around the issue of the *shallow* or *deep* implementation of sustainability. This means that a few alumni did state that in their experience in specific cases, the implementation of sustainability basically meant a communication strategy that followed the current minimum commitment to sustainability in a given field, while others felt their perception and values in sustainability to be better matched. On the one hand, this ideal was thought to somewhat render the alumni less applicable in job markets. On the other hand, some interviewees concluded that there is no other foundation for their identities other than through the ideal image of sustainability. As with their motivations, the alumni clearly shared common goals in their different work, fields, and positions. This seemed to give the professionals a common denominator through which they cultivated a sense of belonging to the same field despite their varying positions, functions, and contexts. The professionals, as a group working in various fields, were perceived to work “*for the aim*” (of sustainability), and thus in the field for sustainability. As Interviewee #15 summarised about the collegiality of sustainability professionals, “*A shared aim... People of different fields... We debate and discuss and go towards the same*”.

4.2. Professional and/or Sustainability Competency

In the interest of furthering sustainability, there were different distinguishable approaches to the expression of the alumni’s professional identity. These differences were predominantly between expressing their sustainability professionalism via leaning on a specific field, often based on their previous studies, or taking sustainability as a freestanding profession expressed in multiple fields. Thus, the interest in some cases was not simply to further sustainability in general, but to do so specifically in and through a respective field. Altogether, furthering sustainability is obviously not a simple or single-dimensional interest, goal, or motivation. In consideration of interests and professionalism (in a workplace), there are several potential functions to further sustainability as a freestanding profession. For example, this could be achieved through the constant development of one’s own position and expertise, or through a constant (re)negotiation of one’s own participation in different, relevant sustainability processes. As Interviewee #2 indicated, “*sell the [sustainability] processes and the value in them to others*”. Several interviewees contemplated the differences between the knowledge and attitudes posed in other common fields and the values in those fields that revolve around sustainability. These disciplinary value differences also manifested in career choices, often somewhat in opposition, e.g., consumerism with sustainability-oriented choices. For example, business students contemplated their impression of the typical commerce- and consumption-oriented values, whereas the professional extension to sustainability of the same alumni was seen to adopt more values connected to the status quo of consumption being unsustainable. Thus, in some cases this identity was founded on a more recognised field, which was seen as an opportunity for employment, that is, an easier box to identify and justify oneself in professionally, or a logical context in which sustainability can be expressed. Interviewee #14 summed this up by saying, “*You have to be a professional of something—with sustainability expertise. It only works within an industry context. It’s more like a synthesis of many things, including the concept of sustainability*”.

Per the interviewees’ experiences, professionals of sustainability are not (yet) widely recognised and the types of positions that best employed their skills are scarce. The alumni

reflected on a few different approaches they used to operationalise sustainability regardless of the different contexts and challenges at work. A typical approach was to simply downplay their own conceptualisation of their profession as a sustainability professional and instead, lean on a professional identity that was already more widely recognised and better understood in a given workplace. However, this was not always an easy task, as Interviewee #3 expressed; *“it makes me anxious to have to state my title and specialisation!”*. The interviewees spoke of being *“sustainability professionals”* in hiding, meaning that rather than risking any further confusion or disbelief in the validity of their professional identity, it seemed easier to be less explicit when describing their conceptualisation of their expertise. This seemed preferable to allowing others to attach their own definitions or perceptions to what it means to be a sustainability professional. However, this *fallback* approach to lean on a recognised profession led some to adopt a strategy where the professional’s aim was to publicly exercise practices of another better recognised profession, while simultaneously pushing their sustainability professionalism. In some cases, there seemed to be a situation wherein the professional had more individual input and choice over the tasks and responsibilities of their position, or the position had innate mobility enabled by the field or organisation. As Interviewee #1 explained, they had been able to *“move away from those functions that didn’t share the same [sustainability] agenda”* within the organisation. Another case came from a position where sustainability was implemented in some manner but was not a deliberate part of the job. However, with individual ambition, the ability to also push sustainability objectives simultaneously from the position was possible, as Interviewee #8 explained how in their position they *“go with service design first”* while also pointing to matters of sustainability in their projects. Thus, with their professional experience, at times the alumni were able to exercise their full potential, as Interviewee #18 suggested *“[as] facilitators of sustainability”*, although they were not necessarily hired explicitly to focus on sustainability.

Some alumni felt that their backgrounds had shaped their views and expertise to the extent that it seemed impossible or undesirable to get rid of those traits entirely. Thus, while the interviewees graduated from an interdisciplinary programme on creative sustainability, they are also competent to work as specialists in their respective fields. This specific field typically was their—often monodisciplinary—base field in which they were trained prior to applying to the interdisciplinary programme. Mostly leaning on the competency of a specific field was due to the approach wherein sustainability was a principle that needed a field in which to be practised. However, some interviewees also saw this as a *fallback* of sorts, where they felt that to gain professional recognition, it was necessary to rely on a professional identity in a better recognised field, such as their base field. As Interviewee #18 reflected, *“even after 10 years no company or organisation understands what it [being a professional of sustainability] means”*. Some interviewees also opposed the idea of having more utility as generalists and argued that the time for generalists has passed as sustainability needs to be implemented in specific processes. Interviewee #4 ruled out the utility of generalists by stating that *“maybe 10 years ago—yes”* but in these times, *“it’s impossible to construct a profession without the skills of another field”*.

4.3. Exercising Professionalism—Emerging Field

In some cases, the adopted identity, leaning on sustainability as a professional field, was seen as an opportunity to drive sustainability specifically, regardless of the field, in multidisciplinary positions and perhaps even in newly founded and proactive posts and tasks. The alumni also emphasised the dynamic and reactive conceptualisation of their professional field, although with a notion that this kind of fluidity rendered them loosely defined and somewhat insecure of the sufficiency or validity of their own abilities at work. Thus, their general knowledge and competency attained seemed relevant to the principle of sustainability itself, but less concrete in practicable terms. In some cases, the alumni were cautiously critical of *representing* sustainability, as sustainability is such a vast topic and area, as Interviewee #7 indicated, *“I don’t know everything about everything related to*

sustainability!". An interdisciplinary professional identity, by the experiences of the alumni, is not the result of several disciplines in isolation, but emerged from the actuality of interdisciplinarity. This approach better reflects the nature of sustainability and its issues, and thus is the appropriate foundation to the field, with basing one's expertise on a newly recognised and defined field proven problematic. Interviewee #11 shared about this that, "*Being a professional [entrepreneur] of sustainability feels at the moment like running a general store. [...] The problems of the world are complex, and so is the definition of this profession.*" The distinction between being a generalist or a specialist, if many lean towards being a professional generalist—although sustainability as a freestanding profession is not yet widely recognised—could make the profession distinguishable from others who are working with sustainability. Ultimately, interviewees having either approach—generalist or specialist—emphasised that rather than paying attention to the question of what competencies are employed in which context, more important are their actions that lead to concrete results.

The approach to utilise their interdisciplinarity, which is similar to a generalist's competency, was about seeing several possible fields as an outlet for their sustainability professionalism. One alumnus described a position where both the organisation and the position were perceived to lean on (interdisciplinary) sustainability. From this peculiar position, Interviewee #13 reflected that since the workplace seemed to share the sustainability agenda, it felt like they "*don't really have a profession*" but rather thought of themselves simply as "*a doer*" (of sustainability and those tasks of the position). Even those professionals employed in positions or organisations that were not sustainability-centred, were somewhat able to push for new positions and functions of sustainability in their respective positions. Interviewees described these new positions and functions as similar to being an internal consultant of sorts and felt that through their experience, they were able to surpass the typical assignments and required functions of their position. While the aim of these lateral functions was sometimes to serve sustainability, the interviewees also felt these functions were needed, for example, in a specific phase of a project or to better serve the organisation as a whole. Interviewee #17 said, "*You wave your hand [over] here, so you can at the same time use your other hand to push sustainability over there*". Some interviewees also felt they had to defend and emphasise their newly attained profession by ruling out their participation in some requested or suggested tasks which they felt belonged more in the domain of their base field. Similarly, at times, they had to defend their participation and relevance in certain tasks precisely because of the profession, based on their interdisciplinary sustainability expertise, with competencies that allowed them to function beyond their base field.

Regardless of these mismatches, the alumni still felt that they could trust their own learned competencies to act as a professional of sustainability, despite the field they were employed in. The interviewees also came to the realisation that their education was not in essence an education on a singular field, but rather on fields in plural, since their capabilities acquired via education could lead to several different employment possibilities. One interviewee reflected this by stating that the aims of their education seemed to point towards not just a profession, but more generally, a type of professionalism. Whether working as an entrepreneur, working for an organisation, or utilising any field and position to further sustainability, these alumni felt their expertise and actions to be the actions of a sustainability professional, rather than turning on the conceptualisation or perception of a certain profession. Interviewee #6 reflected, "*I would be able to go into different fields to drive sustainability. Even though my CV looks a certain way, my expertise is in sustainability*". Several interviewees also saw that being a generalist in the field of sustainability felt timely and relevant. As Interviewee #6 stated, there is a need for professionals of sustainability, as "*who else but they would direct this transition?*", but as sustainability, per se, is not yet "*exercised*", a generalist can "*utilise the context of a better acknowledged profession*" before such a profession is widely recognised.

5. Discussion

Although several sustainability education journal articles [13–16] have pointed out the importance of competencies in sustainability education, the issue of the operationalisation of those competencies and the education of sustainability would benefit from wider exploration. Studying the inner and outer workings of the professional subjects from the dimensions of identity, knowledge, and competency and work experience [23] ought to help develop the conceptualisation of such a novel expert as a professional of sustainability. It seems that the ideal of sustainability is specifically an appropriate foundation to allow the required knowledge community to flourish. In addition, equally as important as the professionals' inner qualities, are the strategies with which they get to operationalise their agency in the workplace. This praxis of the professional agent to the context in which the agency practised [38] is paramount to acknowledge in the education of professionals of sustainability, and in general in the development of the field. Through interviews, observing the knowledge and competency of the sustainability professionals, a juxtaposed nature was often observable and reflected in multiple contexts. Whether the juxtaposed elements were old or new, transformative or reformatory, for nature, for economy or for society, overwhelmingly present was a conversation specifically on the professionalism of sustainability, about whether the professionalism is the kind that points to specialisation or rests on a generalist approach. Rather than looking for a resolution to this question through numbers of specialists or generalists, one could surmise that as the professional identity functions as a foundation to the professional acts [19], and that as the identity is closely related to the views of the given profession's societal contribution [24], it seems that at least the generalist approach to sustainability professionalism is one with distinct features for an identity of being a professional of a certain profession. By no means does this define those educated professionals—striving for specialisation and leaning on an identity of an approximate field [39]—as not professional of sustainability, as ultimately the definition seems to be in the intent of the professional practices.

Having interdisciplinarity as a foundation of a professional identity [40] can also be seen to turn the proximate disciplines into fields through which sustainability education and practice are simply employed, rather than making the monodisciplinary recognised fields—fixed fields with which to identify. Reflections on some of the dichotomies present, such as old–new, specialised–generalised, reformed–transformed, feminine–masculine, empathy–authority, and insider–outsider, seem to narrate the nature of the foundation and practice of the profession. Professional sustainability poses an interesting dilemma to the definition of a professional in challenging the conventions of a professional field, while still requiring recognition as a profession. This, along with a detailed take on what type of sustainability is promoted or utilised in education and practice, are a critical approach to what the goal and ultimate intent of situationally practised sustainability, or sustainabilities, are. Although to some, this might sound more like a semantic reflection, through the interviews, one can conclude that sustainability professionalism leaning on fields in implicitly defining the manner to implement a robust interdisciplinary sustainability professionalism is poorly recognised and often ill-understood. To continue, there is a risk that this *boxed* [21] identification also goes beyond mere rhetoric and is used as a definition and practice of sustainability professionalism, which is needlessly monodisciplinary. However, within the positions of the proximate fields that the educated professional of sustainability has been employed, there seemed to be at least some degree of mobility through which the professionals could utilise their given position, in their given identity, to serve sustainability. Thus, in practice, they had been able to take on a respective role of a sustainability professional's, with a goal to further sustainability [41].

The practical implications of this study lead one to consider—apart from bringing value to sustainability education—the guidance this understanding could bring in utilising the professionals of sustainability, both to the professionals themselves and to their workplace contexts. A better internal understanding as well as the external recognition of the sustainability professional's identity elaborated herein seem vital both, to the perceived quality of the professional's employment, but also to the outcomes and the effect of the professionals' efforts [10]. However, I would like to acknowledge that this is qualitative research, and its analysis is

subject to the typical limitations of qualitative research. Even though the group of interviewees hails from one example of sustainability education and was limited to 19 interviews, I feel that the nature of the programme, the depth reached in the interviews, and the personal expertise in this subject rendered the research and its analysis to qualified end results. As for future research, it seems that further study through the analysis, assessment, and measurement of the sustainability professionals' practical, societal, and sustainability impacts remains a worthy topic, especially in the reflection of agency to structure, as the target of their work for change [42].

6. Conclusions

The alumni's professional identity leans on sustainability, typically taking it as a free-standing discipline that is foremost interdisciplinary. This interdisciplinary identity is built specifically through interdisciplinary practice and not as a sum of its underlying mono-disciplines, although in several cases, the interdisciplinary whole still leaned on one proximate field. Each individual practitioner, at least based on this study, sees that sustainability professionalism is distinctly rooted in having a generalist's capabilities, being systemic and broad, and inter- and transdisciplinarity. However, sometimes the respective weight and importance of these roots can fluctuate based on the professional themselves. However, descriptions through which one can understand the peculiar and transgressive nature of sustainability professionals compared to other perhaps more typical fields and disciplines, those often proximate ones, better capture the distinctiveness of the field. With competency and knowledge, as actionable content of sustainability education, a sense of professional identity and ethos of being, and becoming a professional of sustainability are equally important to further strengthen the drive to practice sustainability in a meaningful and impactful manner. As some interviewees pondered, reflected, and even criticised, sustainability education leans heavily on the ideal image of sustainability—as it ought to—rather than necessarily on its current societal, cultural, or employable status. Altogether, it is apparent that professionals of sustainability face multiple juxtapositions as professionals. To be qualitatively employed and fully utilised, sustainability alumni ought to have their identity well expressed and recognised as part of an existing professional field and a knowledge community, and thus align themselves as “sustainability professionals” within their positions and organisations as well.

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