



LUND UNIVERSITY

Cooperation and Friction

*The Sustainable Development Goals as a system of belief within a
United Nations specialized agency*

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Abstract

Cooperation and Friction: The Sustainable Development Goals as a system of belief within a United Nations Specialized Agency

Across the world are small local agencies connected to the United Nations. Unlike the larger bureaucratic organs that make up the UN, these smaller specialized agencies do not work to frame the founding ideals of the UN which are decided on at the highest levels within the institution, but to interpret, carry out, and monitor different mandates or programs at the local level. These agencies translate ideas or universals such as promoting human rights into actions through individuals. My fieldwork, done at one of these specialized UN agencies, the World Maritime University (WMU), provided a chance to observe the efforts of the UN in educating those who go on to translate their founding ideals into action. This thesis treats the WMU mission statement, capacity building in line with sustainable development, as a system of belief around which the materiality, messaging, and values of the institution are built. I analyze collected interviews with current and former students, observations of university activities and events, transcripts of speeches by school staff, and impressions of the physical space and objects inside the WMU campus to illustrate the rituals and materiality important to the practice and interpretation of this belief. Through establishing the elements of this belief I show the strong top-down power structure created by the UN and imposed through the school administration and faculty and will establish how the role of cooperation is a key element to creating legitimacy in this mission for students. By understanding the importance cooperation between individuals plays on belief uptake, I hope to enhance the efforts of programs like the Sustainable Development Goals and similar.

Keywords: SDGs; Ritual; Cooperation; United Nations; capacity building; institutional culture

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“Certainly, commitments to globalism are strange enough to warrant cultural analysis.” Anna Tsing, *The Global Situation*

1. Introduction

It is well known even if not universally accepted, that we live in a time when international cooperation is vitally necessary to preserve peace but also life on earth as we are faced with issues of climate change and warming oceans. Since its formation in 1945, the United Nations as an institution has attempted to facilitate “international cooperation in solving international problems” (*U.N. Charter*, 1945). At times it has been effective and often not, but it does continuously, as an organization, both frame and attempt to achieve what are defined by the ethnographer Anna Tsing as “universals.” In *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (2011) she writes that universals are global connections, through aspirations for all humanity, but that these connections are forged in cultural dialogue, where frictions are always present. Universals are what make up the charter of the UN. They are statements and goals such as increasing global health, extending education to all, protecting the oceans. On the surface they appear as something all of humanity should want to strive towards, but as they are grounded in the sticky web of connections between all the differing opinions and value systems in the world, they are not smooth and glossy, easy to achieve and easy to know when they have been achieved. Importantly, these universals are not homogenous when looked at up closely.

Eradicating poverty, a universal agreed upon by UN member states to have value and be worth working towards, is not understood universally, but instead through countless negotiations and individual points of view. Collectively working as humanity towards slowing down climate change is another universal, framed and coordinated by the UN, but is comprised of stakeholders with contradicting goals, methods, and acceptable outcomes. A positive goal but with friction at its center. In essence, universals are not truly universal.

It is thus relevant to investigate these universals, these lofty global goals we should all aspire to, as objects of further analysis, both out of sheer curiosity and their relationship to the health and wellbeing of our species, but also in an effort to find out what makes them work, what makes them travel, and what makes them fail. Across the world are small local agencies connected to the United Nations. Unlike the larger bureaucratic organs that make up the UN, these smaller specialized agencies do not work so much to frame the universals decided on at the highest levels within the institution, but to interpret, carry out, and monitor them at the

local level. These agencies translate universals into actions through individuals. The focus of my fieldwork, done at one of these specialized UN agencies, the World Maritime University in Malmö, Sweden, provided a chance to see this work connected to universals within the UN system close up. I was able to witness and scrutinize how the tangible aspects of interpreting large scale global problems are taught and understood in a granular way and at the individual level.

1.1. Background on the World Maritime University and the SDGs

The World Maritime University (WMU) is a post-graduate university educating maritime professionals in subjects such as: the effects of climate change to maritime safety & security, port management, maritime law and policy, energy management within the shipping sector and the importance of green energy, technological developments impacting the industry, and ocean-related matters including Marine Biodiversity Beyond Borders of National Jurisdiction (BBNJ). It was created by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 1983 as an agent of capacity building, with the goal of helping nations underrepresented in maritime decision making to reach their potential in the sector. WMU is the only UN body inside Sweden. Students admitted to the Masters and PhD programs are typically mid-career professionals with a background in the sector.

As the World Maritime University (WMU) is a UN agency it retains hallmarks of the mother institution through which it was created. It has a strong culture of messaging, protocol, goals, and hierarchal structure deriving from the UN and is influenced by the prevailing linguistic and intellectual styles used, the relative historical homogeneity of the staff force, and the power relations between the member states (Galtung, 1986, p. 116). The mission statement of the school is thus influenced by the mission of the UN as a whole.

It is here, in the school's mission statement we can see the clearest connection of WMU to the universals of the United Nations. It reads: "As the International Maritime Organization's centre of excellence for postgraduate maritime education, WMU's mission is to be the world centre of excellence in postgraduate maritime and oceans education, professional training and research, while building global capacity and promoting sustainable development."¹ Both capacity building and sustainable development can be read as universals, something to be actively worked towards as an institution through coordination with other institutions and individuals.

¹ <https://www.wmu.se/about/mission-vision-statement>

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



Figure 1: Table showing the 17 SDGs with SDG wheel in bottom right corner.

The term sustainable development references the Sustainable Development Goals or SDGs, a set of 17 interconnected “Global Goals” introduced and created through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This agenda created the SDGs: a multi-stakeholder, long term, aspirational project conceived by the United Nations (UN), monitored by quantitative indicators, and an example of the development practice of governance by goals (Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, et al., 2022; Caballero, 2019; *Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals*, 2015). More easily put, it is a post-2015 development plan to organize the efforts of governments and the development sector. The 2030 Agenda serves as a “plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity” and defines the 17 global goals, which through their completion, would in theory serve to achieve this global prosperity (United Nations, 2015). It was put into force in 2015 when it was ratified by the General Assembly and all 193 member states. All UN organizations and specialized institutions were required to adopt the goals and connect their work to the achievement of them. Certain countries also ratified the 2030 Agenda and 17 Sustainable Development Goals into their own national laws and policies. Sweden and Japan are two examples of nations with high uptake of the visuals and language into society and integration into their national policy.² These 17 Sustainable Development Goals are also universals. They are represented by colorful iconography

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/25/business/japan-sdg.html>

depicting each goal and are meant to be understood as a collective idea, that all goals are equally worthy and should be accomplished together (see Figure 1).

Finally, the concept of capacity building, yet another universal, is included in the WMU mission statement. The UN defines capacity building as:

... the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within; transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.³

It is the movement of funds, knowledge, technology, and mindsets with the intention of increasing global prosperity. In short it is a specific type of sharing. Typically, this movement flows from wealthier nations to less wealthy nations.

1.2. Aim and Research Questions

This thesis treats the WMU mission statement, capacity building in line with sustainable development, as a system of belief around which the materiality, messaging, and values of the institution are built. The mission of WMU, made up of universals, sits at the centre of this belief system. I rely on the definition of a “centre” by the sociologist Edward Shils:

The centre, or the central zone, is a phenomenon of the realm of values and beliefs. It is the centre of the order of symbols, of values and beliefs, which govern the society... The central zone partakes of the nature of the sacred. In this sense, every society has an ‘official’ religion, even when that society or its exponents and interpreters, conceive of it, more or less correctly, as a secular, pluralistic and tolerant society. (Shils, 1975)

Thus, we must first establish this mission statement as the center of the WMU belief system to further understand this analysis. The mission statement is secular and not conceived of as a religion, but has all the hallmarks of a secular religion, as illustrated above by Shils. It is made up of values and beliefs and is expressed by symbols and

³ <https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building>

materiality. Situated at the centre of the WMU network it is not truly sacred, but close. The universals which make up the mission are lofty and, in some ways, do partake of something beyond humanity. Universals are something the literary theorist and feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak says “we cannot not want,” despite the fact that she sees them as representative of imperial and western dominated narratives and intellectual traditions (Spivak, 1999, p. 172). For most of humanity, and certainly for most of those in the WMU network, they cannot not want to fulfill the mission, even if perfection in that fulfillment is difficult or not possible.

Through studying this mission as a belief system, I aim to identify the elements and actors involved, how they work and their meaning. I investigate the rituals and materiality important to the practice and interpretation of this belief. Through establishing the elements of this belief I uncover and analyze the underlying power structures present. Finally, I will establish how the role of cooperation is a key element to creating legitimacy and thus success for the school mission. By understanding the importance cooperation between individuals plays on belief uptake, I hope to enhance the efforts of endeavors based around similar types of global universals.

My research questions are connected to the analysis sections of this thesis. My first question corresponds to my first analysis section, my second question to the second section of analysis, and my third question is investigated through the third section of my analysis.

1. What elements make up the belief system?
2. What promotes or increases uptake of this belief?
3. How can an understanding of this belief system be used to improve the success of projects connected to promotion of global universals such as the SDGs?

1.3. Overview of Thesis

Section 2 examines previous research relevant to this thesis. Section 3 outlines the main themes and relevant theories I use to make my analysis. In Section 4 I describe my empirical material and methods, including how I define my field and my method of analysis. I examine my own positionality and past experiences and how these elements shaped both the collection of material and my analysis. Section 5 contains my analysis and is broken into three subsections. Section 5.1 examines the belief system I observed, the practices present within it, and the participants in different roles. In 5.2 I address the power structure within the system and present the role of cooperation in the shaping and practice of this belief. Section

5.3 describes a version of this belief system in action, but with new participants in a new setting allowing a discussion of what elements of this system contribute to its success. Section 6 addresses the applicability of my findings and includes a conclusion.

2. *Previous Research*

Because my thesis topic centers on a subject more often studied by the field of political science and relies on concepts from various academic fields including political science, sociology, anthropology, as well as cultural theory, the previous research for this thesis is equally varied. Much research has been done to study the efficacy of the SDGs in quantitative terms (Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, et al., 2022; Caballero, 2019; Mbah & East, 2022). UN affiliated organizations carry out extensive monitoring of indicators in individual member states and sectors (Sachs et al., 2022). Research into the creation process of the Agenda 2030 and its indicators, knowledge transfer between organizations through the goals, and the theory of driving international political change via ‘governance by goals’ takes place both in academia and by various UN agencies (Aririguzoh, 2022; Biermann, Hickmann, Sénit, et al., 2022; Cummings et al., 2018). Because the 2030 Agenda and SDGs were integrated into both the strategic and business plans for WMU and the curriculum itself, the school can be seen as actively working towards achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 4 target 7 (written as 4.7), which requires schools to include Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) elements in their curriculum by 2030 (Lough, 2022; Shulla et al., 2020). While not the main emphasis of this analysis, it can also serve to contribute to the study of SDG implementation and the success of ESD curriculum.

I rely on previous research into the field of civic religion by both Robert Bellah and Edward Shils (Bellah, 1967; Shils, 1975). I take with me the concepts of the existence of a ritualized religious practice outside of the bounds of previously defined “religion” and push this notion further by connecting the concept of “universals” by Anna Tsing to Shils’s concept of societies having a “sacred center” made up by core values and beliefs. For this thesis the sacred center IS the universal. I acknowledge their work in defining the importance of materiality in the creation of belief as well as Shils’s concept of the centre of a society, being made up of the core symbols and values which transcend differences of the individuals believers practicing the belief (Shils, 1975, pp. 3-4).

The work of social anthropologist and ethnographer Rachel Irwin and Richard Smith on analyzing the World Health Assembly as a ritual touches most closely to this thesis. In their

paper “Rituals of Global Health: Navigating the World Health Assembly” they identify and analyze the way that different participants of the World Health Assembly, also connected to the United Nations, participate in ritual and the ways this practice influences the outcomes of negotiations taking place there (Irwin & Smith, 2019). I use a similar method of analyzing the work of WMU as ritual but take it further to call what happens at WMU a belief system and not simply ritual disconnected from a higher belief in a set of core values or universals.

Finally, I hope to place my thesis into the discussion of how these major concepts affecting humanity, these universals such as ending poverty, slowing down the effects of global warming, and promotion of human rights can be accomplished in practical terms. As mentioned earlier, there is much research into the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, but there remains little qualitative research into the process of mindset change of the individuals tasked with implementing these Sustainable Development Goals. All indicators monitoring the “achievement” of the SDGs are quantitative and fail to explain the attitude changes necessary for people to want to achieve them. It is clear from previous research that the SDGs will likely not be achieved but it will not be known how many people’s beliefs shifted through the process of attempting to achieve them (Biermann, Hickmann, & Sénit, 2022; Esquivel, 2016; Sénit & Biermann, 2021; Struckmann, 2018). There is some research into understanding how the prevailing ideological structures at the UN shape the products it produces and how some are left out of the progress achieved through such global efforts, but more must be done (De Vries, 2019; Fukuda-Parr & Hegstad, 2018). My hope is that this thesis can provide practical suggestions which can further the global and individual mindset change needed to achieve these universals.

3. Theoretical Framework

First and foremost I use the theories of Marilyn Motz from her work “The Practice of Belief”. In this work she lays out a framework for the practice of studying the process of believing and what this practice can uncover. In looking at how people believe Motz posits that “Belief requires a believer” centering the study on the individuals and not only the concepts held as beliefs (Motz, 1998, p. 349). She encourages the researcher to “...look at the contexts in which the practices of belief occur, the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the process” (Motz, 1998, p. 350). An important distinction she makes is that of meaning and belief. To Motz, and thus in this thesis, “meaning is derived from text...belief is located in a person” (Motz, 1998, p. 350). Using this theory I identify the meaning as coming

from the mission statement of the school and the 2030 Agenda which creates the SDGs and the believers as the participants, the school staff, faculty, and students as the believers.

Another relevant theory which I use to frame this analysis comes from Durkheim through Douglas Marshall in his work “Behavior, Belonging, and Belief: A Theory of Ritual Practice”. Beginning the essay Marshall states “The practice of ritual produces two primary outcomes- belief and belonging” (Marshall, 2002). He defines the differences between how belief and belonging are produced by ritual, most importantly, that belonging requires being together or “co-presence,” in his words (Marshall, 2002, p. 361). It is the action inherent in belonging which interests me in this thesis. The process through which belief and belonging are created are not the same and I will show each path, to belief and to belonging, as I observed them.

I elaborate on the term ritual and how it is understood within the field of cultural analysis and how I use it to explain the system of belief I observed to be present at WMU. Drawing from the work of cultural anthropologists Victor Turner and Clifford Geertz through the lens of sociologist Richard Sennett, I use a working understanding of ritual as having three “building blocks”: repetition, symbols, and expression (Sennett, 2012, p. 89; Smith & Riley, 2009; Turner, 1969). I also work with the concepts of the rites of passage by ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, specifically the subdivision of rites of passage into having three ordered phases: first of separation, then transition, and lastly incorporation (Gennep, 1960, p. 11). These two understandings of ritual help me to identify and understand components and phases of ritual processes happening at WMU.

I use theories on the subject of material culture, most notably that of Jane Bennett in her “agency of assemblages” theory to understand how collections of material items inside the main WMU building influence the experience of the students and help to reinforce the message of the mission statement and the process of achieving belonging. Bennett uses the term assemblage to refer to groupings of “vibrant matter” including material objects, concepts, and humans (Bennett, 2010, p. 23). Each item in the assemblage has agency on the other items, and together a collection of items can generate its own agency as an assemblage. This theory challenges us to consider the primacy of humans over all other materialities as it recognizes the “power possessed by nonhuman bodies too” (Bennett, 2010, p. 32).

Erving Goffman’s work “The Nature of Deference and Demeanor” helped me to understand the role of hierarchy and ritual in the belief creation (Goffman, 1956). Goffman puts forth the idea that everyday in-person interactions consist of acts of deference from one to another which define and reinforce levels of hierarchy present. I observed many acts of

deference between students and the faculty and staff of the school which made clear the hierarchy but also strengthened the effect of specific rituals which furthered the process of belief in the students.

To show how belonging is produced at WMU I rely on two principal theories. First is Richard Sennett's theory on cooperation. Sennett theorizes that cooperation is a practice, an action, and most importantly, a skill to be learned. It is not a naturally occurring process in adults. To him, successful cooperation relies on three things: dialogic over dialectic communication, informality between practitioners, and empathy over sympathy (Sennett, 2008, 2012). Dialogic communication is defined as listening while communicating and attempting to hear what people mean as well as what they say, versus dialectic conversation which consists of one party conveying their knowledge to another without space for different interpretations or co-creation of knowledge. This theory is important to my argument in that it allows me to show the role of action in producing the feeling of belonging in the students.

Finally, I use "Friction" by Anna Tsing. Tsing theorizes that there are multiple frictions present in all collective endeavors towards achieving "universals" such as the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. She defines universals as global connections and dreams, which are most importantly, universal. In a sense, they are ideas worthwhile to all and impossible to turn down. Universals are what make up the charter of the United Nations and the mission statement of WMU. Ending hunger, increasing world health, slowing down climate change. In working towards achieving these universals she suggests that there is always "difference within common cause" and it must be acknowledged as part of the process of the endeavor (Tsing, 2011, p. 246). I use this theory to show how there is no homogeneity within the belief system at WMU. That "differences invigorate social mobilizations" such as the mission of WMU and thus the 2030 Agenda (Tsing, 2011, p. 245). While WMU might want to highlight the cooperation and frictionless working together of the student body towards achievement of their mission, in reality there are multiple frictions present, as noted by the students themselves, but the process of working through them makes the students feel more prepared for furthering this mission. Universals need knowledge to move and "the mission of the universal is to form bridges... across localities and cultures" but in all movement and building processes, there is always friction (Tsing, 2011, p. 7).

4. Methods and Materials

Fieldwork for my thesis was conducted from September through March 2023. Broadly, my fieldwork material consists of 25 one hour long formal interviews, roughly 85 days of observations, transcripts of 8 official WMU speeches, collected material items, and photographs of the main WMU campus. All formal interviews were conducted over Zoom and recorded in order to create transcripts, but also to preserve video of the exchange including facial and vocal expression. In addition I conducted shorter spontaneous interviews which were not recorded or transcribed, but added as fieldnotes. I use interviews to map out how different actors understand concepts of the belief and how they perceive their relationship within the system. I use speeches given by University officials, lecturers, researchers, and other actors to demonstrate how various stakeholders define and interpret the elements of meaning in the school mission and to analyze the process of transferring meaning into the practice of belief. Items of material culture are used to demonstrate alternative ways of signaling the mission, as well as an opportunity to consider who had access to them and at what events and spaces they were used. Material objects form an integral part of the belief system and I consider the origin of each object in addition to the agency those objects have on both the believer and their practice of belief. My observations serve to identify rituals, make connections between rhetoric and materiality and will be woven throughout the analysis in what amounts to a bricolage method of research (Rogers, 2015).

4.1. WMU Voices

The premise for my presence on campus was to complete a two and a half month internship (this later was lengthened) where I would be on campus working within the Registry Department. My supervisor at WMU works as the university's main Registrar and tasked me with interviewing 14 former WMU students to produce text for a brochure titled *WMU Voices*. She chose the participants based on UN institutional norms of balancing gender, geography, and majority/minority status of their home nations(see section 4.2 Definitions, page 21). The brochure was intended as a fundraising and marketing tool by the school. After each interview I would type up transcripts and create a shortened version using the interviewee's own words, but edited by myself to reflect overall themes of the brochure. My supervisor wanted me to ask similar questions to each interviewee but hoped each one would produce text which "did not flatten the voices of the individuals and highlighted the diversity not just of students backgrounds but of career prospects after completing their studies at WMU." (Sue Jackson, Personal Communication 08/04/2023) Questions for the

initial interviews were decided on by myself and my supervisor. In addition to questions for the WMU Voices project she also allowed me to ask my own questions, for the purpose of my research.

In addition to conducting the WMU Voices interviews I attended student events including the invocation of the class of 2023 and graduation ceremony for the class of 2022 in an effort to expose me to more of the school culture and activities, as the interviewees were graduates and not currently enrolled at WMU. I also attended conferences on subjects related to the maritime industry and United Nations/ IMO endeavors hosted at the school during my internship as well as events connected to donor relations and student awards/scholarships.

In my role as an intern, I was addressed and treated as a member of staff which allowed me to “blend in” to events and helped explain my presence. My presence on campus and interaction with current students and staff gave me a background to the interviews and perspectives I was receiving from the chosen alumni I would interview for the WMU Voices project. This allowed me to understand when an alumni referenced different aspects of student life during their studies. I could compare it to what I had experienced with the current students, noting where traditions or practices had changed and thus probe these differences through further observations and casual conversations. Thus I can define my field as physically being the campus of WMU in Malmö, but also the experiences of the students, both current and graduated, and the spaces where they took place. Students live in a dormitory in Malmö, many spoke to me about events which happened there, but I did not visit. Students travel for field studies across the world as part of their program of study, and though I did not accompany them, the stories they told of feelings or experiences as part of that process, are included by me in their entire “student experience.”

In the spring of 2023, after my onsite internship was finished I began conducting further interviews with informants, this time current students. These interviews served to highlight different aspects of the belief system and culture of WMU and were the result of “following the thread” from what alumni had spoken about, to figuring out if current students held similar beliefs or shared similar experiences. During the spring I also took the bus most mornings to WMU using the same line as the current students. I would get on the bus one stop before the students each day they had class. Some mornings we chatted, most mornings we did not make contact more than a nod or wave, but it allowed me to watch them each day as they interacted with each other and with Malmö. This did not produce as much material as a true “go-along” but provided a window into the student’s very informal interactions (Kusenbach, 2003).

Another element of my material and field of study is the building inside which the culture and belief I observed at WMU takes place. A longer description of the WMU building follows in the first analysis section of this thesis, but I turn to ethnologists Lars-Eric Jönsson and Fredrik Nilsson's book "Cultural History: an ethnographic method book" for inspiration on treating the building itself as not only an expression of culture but also a point from which we can both realize and understand culture further (Jönsson & Nilsson, 2017). In the book Jönsson further expands on how buildings can be "read" as if they are themselves an archive, but also the agency which they have over their inhabitants (Jönsson & Nilsson, 2017, p. 73). Just by being present inside the building, using it myself as it was intended to be used but also watching the students use the space, and allowing those experiences to inform my line of inquiry opened up further research and helped me to define my field not as everything happening inside the building, but to include the building and the agency it produces as an element of my field.

4.2. *Bricolage*

Bricolage, within the field of cultural analysis, refers to the use of multiple perspectives and methodologies applied to one research subject. It derives from the work of anthropologist and ethnographer Claude Lévi-Strauss and has been further refined by sociologist Norman K. Denzin, methodologist Yvonna S. Lincoln and critical theorist Joe L. Kincheloe (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Kincheloe, 2011; Lévi-Strauss, 1972). Using bricolage allowed me to shift my methods as necessary to follow different themes and allowed "for dynamics and contexts to dictate which questions get asked, and which methods to employ..." (Rogers, 2012, p. 6). During the process of my initial interviews for the WMU Voices project a similar theme continued to come up, one of alumni feeling they had learned skills of diplomacy, cross-cultural communication, and cooperation at WMU. I began to understand that this perception of new skills was connected to their understanding of their place and ability towards achieving the school's mission of capacity building and SDG promotion. Through a bricolage approach I was able to follow that thread, a developing thread of how the students or alumni perceived their role within the school mission. Through continuing to observe and participate in school events I made the decision to begin interviewing current students, to broaden my understanding of the phenomenon I had identified. Finally, I was able, through application of political bricolage, to recognize how the answers coming from different people, most importantly the categories of graduates and current students, might be different and affected

by different power structures and goals, but still be telling the same story. I was able to keep in mind the ways in which “knowledge and power are connected” (Rogers, 2012, p. 6). The graduates knew they were being profiled in the WMU Voices project for their success and their success was often related to their connection with WMU, while the current students exist in a different power dynamic with the school and this affected their answers to me.

4.3. Method of analysis

My analysis is set up first to treat the mission statement of the school as a system of belief and from there to investigate what elements make up this practice and what power relations are created in the “doing” of this belief. I rely heavily on Marilyn Motz’s method of studying belief, keeping in mind that “belief requires a believer” and that while meaning is derived from text, in this case the school’s mission statement and 2030 Agenda, other practices such as ritual, narrative, and materiality enhance the practice (Motz, 1998, p. 350). In teasing out the elements which make up this belief system I am able to identify underlying power relations present.

In turning this type of cultural analysis, often practiced on the mundane and routine, to instead be applied to grand ideals and sweeping universals, I hope to answer the call of Anna Tsing, towards a globalization of thought, a widening of perspective to meet the demands of this critical time in the history of humanity without losing a critical perspective. In “The Global Situation” she encourages us as researchers to “...hold onto the excitement of this endorsement of planetary interconnection without trading our critical stance for globalist wishes and fantasies” (Tsing, 2000, p. 330). I hope that this bricolage methods applied to an emerging phenomenon will provide a new perspective and produce concrete suggestions from a place grounded in critical thought.

I turn again to Anna Tsing to say how I came to my methodologies for both collecting data and interpreting it: “As an ethnographer I am particularly dedicated to... trying to figure out what it is that people are trying to tell me that is important. The research object gets formulated within the research experience” (Tsing, 2014). I went into my time at WMU with an idea that I wanted to study the SDGs and listened to as many different people as possible. Once I found an interesting thread I followed it, creating my research object from within the research process. I tried to stay out of the way and observe events and interactions without affecting them, only stepping forward when I needed clarity on meaning or context. I am grateful that the department I worked within and most closely with meshed well with this

approach. They allowed me to observe a wide range of school activities and processes and ask questions without questioning my motive or diverting my observations.

When working with my interviews I started by recording them through the Zoom platform. By recording them I felt calmer and could focus on the informant and their answers rather than trying to write anything down. It also provided me with an opportunity before the interview started to once more state who I was, what I was doing, and how their responses would be used. All informants agreed to be recorded. After the interviews were over I listened to them multiple times as I transcribed them and then began coding different sections, words, or phrases to correspond with emerging themes. Through this process the repeated themes came forward and I could then begin to connect interviews to other interviews. My interview questions were always the same, although not in the same order depending on the nuances and rhythms of the individual interviews. As themes emerged in my analysis, I could also begin to identify how each question affected the topics they brought forth. I then began to connect themes to theory to complete my analysis. (See Appendix A for interview questions.)

4.4. Reflexivity

To truly define and represent my field, it is vastly important to position myself inside it and expand on my role in shaping it. In examining a belief system centered on ideals held valuable by a UN agency, I must first admit that I myself could be defined as a believer. At the age of 13 I travelled to New York City to attend a conference hosted by the United Nations. I was a youth representative from my hometown of Washington, DC/Northern Virginia and came home from the experience convinced I wanted to work there “when I grew up”. This interest in the work of the UN and belief in the goals of the organization led me to my choice of major in my bachelor’s degree, International Affairs, where I continued learning about both the history of and activity of the UN. WMU was my first choice of location for my fieldwork and I was glad they were interested in hosting me.

More important to this specific project is my role within WMU as perceived by my informants. I was presented as an intern in the registry department and thus, a representative of the school. Through the interviews I would further explain my own research and my role as that of a Lund University masters student, but upon our first meeting my informants knew me as an employee and representative of WMU. I am currently working at WMU as a conference assistant for an event taking place in June. By currently working at WMU my

analysis continues to be shaped by my daily presence in the same space and culture on which I am writing. At the same time, I continue to shape the culture by my presence within it.

There is great risk here for not acknowledging the privilege but also pitfalls of conducting fieldwork as an “insider” as explained by Robert Larabee (Labaree, 2002, p. 116). I represent an “insider” of the organization I am studying through my “biographical profile, political activity, research agenda, and relationship to the community under study” (Labaree, 2002, p. 102). It should be noted that I am more likely to be believed by my informants as to my motivation for conducting my research and more likely to believe the words of my informants, because in a way, I want them to reinforce my own belief. This of course must be challenged and made transparent. This has been done to the best of my ability through distancing myself “introspectively from the phenomena so that a more complete understanding of the community’s social reality can be obtained” (Labaree, 2002, p. 116). When I think about the phenomenon of believing one can individually work towards the accomplishment of the SDGs, I acknowledge that I hope my thesis can add to the body of research which can further refine and improve large global efforts to aide humanity, but I do not see myself as actively participating in the specific work of WMU in its efforts towards capacity building or achieving the SDGs.

The premise of my first interviews was to generate text for the WMU Voices brochure, as indicated earlier. The participants were chosen by school administration to participate because they were likely to speak well of their experience at the school, thus the scope of my initial material was considerably narrowed. But my own enthusiasm for the work of the school presented to the informants through both who I was to them, an employee, a representative of the WMU Voices project, and my demeanor and conversation during the interviews also contributed to shaping the answers I received. Just as my data collection unfolded as I listened for threads and themes to follow, my first interviews and observations shaped how the entire field shifted and my research process unfolded. Had the initial first interviewees been different individuals, this entire thesis could have unfolded differently. Had those individuals been interviewed by school staff and given to me as a transcript instead, the research would have unfolded differently. I acknowledge that who I am and what I chose to follow or dive deeper into during my fieldwork shaped the entire endeavor and my own positionality provided both specific insight, as well as specific points of view unique to me and this project.

4.5. Ethical considerations

My research has been done with my best efforts at minimizing any embarrassment or harm to informants, other students, staff, or members of the WMU/IMO network. All interviews were done only after consent was given by the informants and with a clear explanation of my dual role in collecting information for both WMU and myself as a master's student. Every effort has been made to anonymize all participants with the exception of the President of WMU, Secretary-General of the IMO, and University Registrar Sue Jackson who are quoted directly. The speeches are public record and can be obtained through WMU. As I am currently working at WMU I have chosen not to include interviews or observations of my colleagues in my immediate department in an effort to allow them to speak freely with me as a colleague and not a researcher.

In all recorded interviews, towards the end of our conversations I would take a moment to recap for the informants the main points and themes I heard them speaking about. This gave them a chance to edit both their own words but also to help me understand what ideas or concepts they themselves held as most important or to allow us to find shared understanding together if I was confused or misinterpreted their answers or gestures/tones. At the end of all interviews I described the process through which I would listen to, transcribe, and then begin to draw themes from the transcriptions.

4.6. Definitions

Capacity building

The term capacity building is used by WMU, the IMO, and the UN and it is specifically used in the mission statement of WMU, thus it belongs to my subject of study. It is, however, a contested term. There are those who consider it to be jargon-y and find it hides the actual actions and relationships taking place.⁴ Footitt et al. write that the term is connected to an intellectual framework which reinforces current power structures and fails to create a space of dialogical conversation between NGOs and the people they work with. (Footitt et al., 2020) As it belongs to my subject, I use it according to the definition by the UN and provided in section 1.1.

Global majority/Global minority

⁴ <https://nonprofitquarterly.org/should-we-cancel-capacity-building/>

I attempt to have only two categorization of my informants in this thesis, those from the global majority or minority and those who are current or former students. I define the term global majority/minority through national membership in The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The United Nations uses the terms developing nations, which roughly corresponds to non-OECD membership, the majority of nations. The global majority are then these non-OECD member, developing nations. The global minority is defined as OECD member states and are considered developed nations. Other terms that mean roughly the same are global north and global south nations or Low-Middle-High GDP nations. All of these terms are problematic in some way, but I choose to mostly use global majority/minority although developing nation is used within my field and I use it when it best facilitates understanding. (Campbell-Stephens, 2021; Footitt et al., 2020; *Inclusive Language Guide*, 2023)

I choose to categorize my informants in this way in an attempt to connect their ideas and experiences to the endeavor of capacity building, which generally is seen as a movement of funds and knowledge from the global minority to the global majority. Another reason I chose to use this categorization and terminology is to contribute to the effort of normalizing a non-westernized point of view when thinking about the world and peoples who make it up. Some of my informants, but not all, also use this terminology.

5. *Analysis*

Here I will present my empirical material and analyze it using my chosen theory. It is divided into three subsections. The first subsection titled *Belief* introduces the system of belief and will help the reader to “see” the rituals, performances, and materialities which different actors manipulate in an effort to increase the students’ uptake of this belief. The section will begin with an introduction to the physical setting of my field and research subject. In subsection 2 titled *Belonging* I will show more clearly the underlying power dynamics present in this system and the mechanisms which are working between the individuals at the peer-to-peer level which I believe is actually driving the belief uptake. Finally in subsection three titled *The Workshop* I will describe an event held at WMU which was focused on transmitting this belief system to others outside of the WMU network and show which elements were successful and which were not and why.



Figure 2: WMU main building/ Old Harbour Master's Building in brick with Malmö Live building in white, behind.

5.1. Belief

I will first establish how the mission statement of WMU is expressed as a belief system and define and explain what this system consists of. I begin again with the assertion by sociologist Douglas Marshall that “The practice of ritual produces two primary outcomes—belief and belonging.” (Marshall, 2002, p. 1). This section will discuss the rituals and rites of passages taking place at WMU. It will begin by describing the physical setting for these rituals and include a discussion of their components and materiality. I will discuss the concept of legitimacy and how it is created and perceived by the believers and participants. I will end with a discussion how I perceived and analyzed uptake of the belief system by participants.

5.1.1. Setting

To enter my field location it is best to approach by bridge. The campus of the World Maritime University is housed in the Old Harbour Master’s Building just across the canal from Malmö Central train station. It is situated between the historical dockland and the city

center, one of the first buildings visible to those arriving by train. This district of Malmö has seen a repurposing of old industrial areas redeveloped with modern office, university, and apartment buildings. The Old Harbour Master's Building is built in the National Romantic style and was completed 1908-10. It originally served as offices for the port authority and includes a tower, previously used for surveillance across the Öresund Sound. It stands in stark contrast to the Malmö Live hotel located directly across the street, a modern skyscraper seeming to grow upwards from directly behind the WMU building when approaching from the train station. Malmö Live houses a hotel but also a large concert venue which is used by WMU for larger conferences and their yearly graduation ceremony.



Figure 3: WMU Main building pictured from the West, with the modern new addition visible.

If one approaches WMU from the Malmö Live side and not the Central Station side, its hidden secret is revealed. Attached to the back of the Old Harbour Master's Building is a modern addition, a steel and glass growth connecting to the modernity of the revitalized docklands beyond and a connection between the Malmö Live building. This addition was added in 2015, the same year the Malmö Live building was also completed. The architects began with the concept that the building serves as a hinge between the industrial harbor and the city, then continued that theme of an “urban hinge” connecting the historic building

section to the modern new build, and thus more generally, between the old and new.⁵ Roughly half of the building is new and half is old, with the design giving equal weight to each half. I see this as an attempt to connect this specific building to a more general theme present in Malmö's own mission. 2022 Malmö had the youngest population of all Swedish cities but has made an effort to keep and restore and most importantly use historic buildings in favor of erasing them completely to make way for only that which is new.



Figure 4: Ground floor of WMU with new auditorium on left and former exterior, now interior on right.

⁵<https://www.dezeen.com/2015/07/10/metal-glass-facetsc-surround-world-maritime-university-new-harbour-side-home-malmo-harbour-sweden/>



Figure 5: Interior balconies of the new building facing the historic roofline.



Figure 6: Interior of WMU, with historic roofline encased inside the new build addition on left.

The interior space also speaks to this idea of a joining or hinge between two disparate things, as the new addition encloses much of one side of the original building and makes new interior spaces from what were originally conceived as outdoor surfaces. Multi-leveled interior balconies face the former exterior and roofline of the building with a bright and sunny top floor bistro at the same level as the former roof. To be constantly faced with the modern, sharp diagonal lines and smooth concrete of the new addition against the traditional shapes and textures of the brick and copper is both impressive, at times jarring, and exciting. It speaks to an equality between past and present as the old has not been entirely erased to make way for the new. Both old and new are given value and prominence and are asked to work together to create a new space of learning at WMU as opposed to one being favored over the other.

It is this approach from Central Station; seeing the WMU building for the first time with the Malmö Live skyscrapers rising from behind and the older buildings across the canal which welcomes the students to campus. Most students I interviewed were familiar with what the building looked like before arriving to Malmö. WMU uses images of their building across many publications and platforms, so the building is not unfamiliar to most new students. Simply travelling from Central Station to the WMU main entrance, as all students must do, exposes them to a bustling part of town, full of commuters on bikes and busses whizzing past, adding another layer of action and life to their visual recognition of the façade of the building. Entering the building is also different, and most I interviewed were not aware of the mixture of old and new in the interior before their arrival. Some noted they had “never seen a building like this, with old and new together” or that the building is “more impressive inside, when you can look up from the ground to the sky” (Current student interviews, March 7, 2023 and September 22, 2022). Multiple students connected the architecture and presence of both old and new in harmony to the reality of “the present-day maritime industry.” Another student noted : “...from my point of view, you can notice how they keep the, let’s call the historical building and the new building in the same place....It is like they deliver a message that they don’t forget about the historical building, the tradition... of the Maritime community and its history” (Current student interview, March 7, 2023). It is from this building, with its location of prominence right next to Central Station, serving as a visual representation of revitalization of Malmö and the forward-looking nature of the city, that the stage is set for new students to enter the culture of WMU.

5.1.2. *Ritual and Performance*

Now that the stage is set for the doing or creating or performance of the mission statement of WMU as belief system we must add the believers. I return to the discussion of the elements of ritual, the symbols and expressions of them and the phases moved through in their practice. To cross the bridge and enter WMU is one small ritual, the separation and transition from outside to inside and the incorporation into a new space of both outside and inside.

As indicated earlier, students at WMU are mid-career professionals already working in the maritime industry. The majority of students come from the global majority and will return to their home nations after their 14 months stay in Malmö. Many have not been to Europe or Sweden before attending school at WMU. The connection of the movement required to join WMU is clear, this is the separation aspect of a rite of passage. Ethnographer Anna Tsing takes this concept further showing how an analysis of movement can be both of “movement as mobility and movement as mobilization” (Tsing, 2011, p. 214). By moving their bodies from their home nations to WMU these students begin the rite of passage process by separating from their home cultures and communities. But they also begin the process of movement of mindset and heart, through the process of physically leaving home. This is movement as mobility AND mobilization.

The imposing nature of the building they then enter and study in sets a tone of formality which is continued through their time as students. All students I interviewed acknowledged that the WMU building was “impressive” thus indicating that it played a role in shaping their experience. It is not a building which one simply allows to fade into the background, it actively frames all activity and experience taking place both inside and nearby.

Shortly after arrival in Malmö, after settling into their dorms, and attending meetings on practicalities of living in Sweden for the next 14 months, the students attend an academic invocation hosted at the WMU campus in the main auditorium. This is the first time all students are together and are addressed by school administration as an entity. This is the beginning of the next section of the rite of passage, the transition stage (Gennep, 1960). The not yet but almost students are about to become true students through this invocation.

As the students are seated in the auditorium, school administrators and faculty line the back row, looking down on the students as the shape of the auditorium dictates. At each event I attended at WMU during my fieldwork, the president of the school Dr. Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry entered the auditorium only after all participants were seated and ready, adding a layer

of both anticipation and formality to all events. On this occasion, the inauguration of the class of 2023 she addressed the students for their first time. According to students I interviewed, this experience, hearing her speak to them as a class of students in the formalized setting of the inauguration ceremony, was the second most impactful event of their student lives in terms of showing them what the culture and mission of WMU was and would be. The first experience, walking through the doors of the main building, was also noted by all informants as impactful. Thus, this event can be seen as another framing element of their introduction to the mission of WMU and a place where the school administration is clearly defining and transmitting the beliefs of the school. It is where they become indoctrinated into this belief system as believers themselves.



Figure 7: Dr. Doumbia-Henry speaks to students at the academic inauguration ceremony. SDG cubes are visible the right of the image.

At the academic inauguration, surrounded by the faculty and staff of WMU and the building itself, students were officially welcomed into the “family” and “mission” of the school. The formality of the event indicated through the dress of the students and WMU staff and the presence of all available staff in attendance, the ritual of waiting until all were seated before the president entered, and the highly formal tone of address including references to “our beloved president” and “our beloved WMU” all created a space of reverence which was palatable. We can read this formality as having an impact on how the message being

delivered was received by the recipients, the students. In his essay “The Neglected Situation” Erving Goffman states: “...there must be a sense in which the loudness of a statement can only be assessed by knowing first how distant the speaker is from his recipient” (Goffman, 1964, p. 133). The formality of the address, the materiality and performance by school staff helped to amplify the importance of the message. Before hearing what she would say, the students were primed to believe it was of value through the deference showed to her by school staff (Goffman, 1956). Through interviews with students they expressed exactly that outcome, that they experienced the event as “formal” and “important” in their entrance into the culture of the school.

University president Dr. Doumbia-Henry spoke to the students of the “gossamer thread of the Sustainable Development Goals, which unite all the work we do at WMU, and connect us to the rest of humanity in our endeavors to create a more equitable society and healthy plane” (Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry, WMU student inauguration, September 22, 2022). She also spoke of transformation within the students themselves which would be accomplished through their studies at WMU: “Your knowledge of the maritime and ocean fields will be massively increased. Your knowledge of our world and its inhabitants will be transformed. You will grow in both ability and confidence, and in turn your growth will transform others” (Cleopatra Doumbia-Henry, WMU student inauguration, September 22, 2022). Here we can see an acknowledgement of the Sustainable Development Goals as central to the endeavors of the school, but also indication that in order to achieve these goals, transformation of the students themselves would be necessary.

In this description of the inauguration ceremony there are elements of ritual represented. Repetition is represented in the yearly nature of the ceremony. The transition stage is made obvious by multiple speakers through their acknowledgement of how this class was “beginning their journey” and uses of phrases such as “this year’s inauguration”. The students were aware of being allowed into a community through their inclusion in this year’s ceremony. The symbols presented were the SDG goals, as shown physically by the blocks, logos, and various signage visible to the students while listening to the speakers make reference to the ideas, texts, and actions connected to them (see Figure 7). The performance was enhanced by the hierarchy displayed both by the faculty standing behind the students as well as the president entering the stage after everyone was seated.

In addition to being told they would receive skills to accomplish the SDGs, they are faced with visual representations of this same message across the campus. It is not surprising that visual signaling of the SDGs is high, the school is an agency of the UN and includes

achieving the goals as part of their mission as an institution. Upon walking into the building one is first confronted with signage on the floor asking people to remain 2 meters apart to prevent the spread of Covid, linking to goal 3: good health and wellbeing. Walking up the main staircase the SDGs are displayed as posters and the main classroom/auditorium has soft cubes behind the speakers dais with each goal depicted. During my fieldwork I observed many different meetings and events held there, each time noticing that the pyramid of goals was rearranged and re-built with cubes representing goals corresponding to that particular lecture or speech. Through interviews and casual conversation, I learned that these blocks were moved and considered for each event held in that space. Students can purchase lanyards to carry their building access cards, pillows, or pens all with the goals colorfully displayed. These items are for sale at the front desk, directly next to the main entrance. Signage across campus includes the SDG wheel and the new school logo being used in 2023 to mark the 40th anniversary of the school, it includes the “0” in the 40 made into an SDG wheel (See Figure 8).



Figure 8: WMU Logo with SDG wheel for 40th anniversary.

One month later, at a joint IMO-WMU research conference marking the 50th anniversaries of the Stockholm Declaration and London Protocol⁶ which included officials



Figure 9: An SDG pin with the IMO logo inside.

from various national governments, IMO members, and maritime researchers, I saw a diffusion of this belief system through the student body in attendance. I had observed all senior staff at WMU wearing an enamel pin with the SDG wheel from my first days of fieldwork. I do not know if this action was due to policy or personal choice, but it was widespread and complete. At the conference I noticed more pins with the SDG wheel, but this time with an Irish flag in the middle for the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs representative, or an IMO logo in the middle for their

⁶ <https://conferences.wmu.se/londonstockholm50/>

head of legal affairs (See Figure 9). All conference attendees received bags containing brochures, publications, and one enameled SDG pin.

By day two of the conference, nearly 80% of the students in the audience were now wearing one as well. I see the act of putting on the pin as a visible signal to others, both other students, faculty and staff, and conference attendants, that these students were now “buying in” to the belief system. This is the final phase of the rite of passage for these students, putting on the pins signifies, to me at least, the rite of incorporation. Incorporation being the perfect word here, as it derives from the Latin word *incorporare* meaning “to unite into one body.” By putting the pin visibly on their body, they signify that their minds now match their bodies, the believe in the ideas represented by the pins.

5.1.3. *Legitimacy*

Discussion of the students joining into the belief system of WMU requires an examination of legitimacy. While a primary aim of my thesis is to uncover the constituent elements in the practice of belief present at WMU, the role of legitimacy is relevant to how belief is constructed. In their book *The Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals*, political scientists Magdalena Bexell and Kristina Jönsson define the role of legitimacy in the implementation of the SDGs and note that gaining legitimacy and de-legitimacy is a process and not a fixed place, which must be studied together in order to understand how the process is working and on what it is being asserted (Bexell & Jönsson, 2021). They trace the elements of legitimacy in the form of agents, sources, and perceptions which can be applied to the case of WMU and their application of audiences and objects of legitimacy can also be applied to my analysis.

WMU can be seen as an agent of legitimacy for the SDGs as it works towards their implementation while the students represent an audience of legitimacy. Most students attending WMU are mid-career and are already familiar with their area of the maritime sector and as the IMO is connected to most aspects of the maritime industry, therefore it can be assumed that most students primed to accept the legitimacy of the belief system, and thus the school’s mission and the endeavors of accomplishing the SDGs through their pre-existing belief in the IMO or UN’s legitimacy. While the students might be primed to accept the legitimacy of WMU to carry out the SDGs, they might not yet be primed to accept their own individual role as agents of legitimacy. I argue, that by putting on the pins themselves they are signaling this new assumed role, as an agent and not merely an audience of legitimacy.

By putting on the pin they accept that they, as individuals and as a group, can now work towards the achievement of these goals. It is an important distinction which is echoed through interviews with current students and graduates.

Of course there is not complete and perfect acceptance of this belief system, nor perfect understanding of what it means. Students who graduated before 2015 (the SDGs and their visual iconography were introduced by the UN in 2015) were, across the board, less likely to recognize or understand the meaning of SDG iconography. Pre-2015 graduates were more likely to be familiar with the SDGs if they were currently working with the IMO or other UN agency, as they had been learned outside of WMU. Some post-2015 graduates were also unclear on the exact meaning of the SDGs or from where they derived, despite being on campus when they were being used and taught. One student wondered if the UN had adopted the SDGs from WMU, indicating that they had visited the UN in New York City and “they had them there too” and not the other way around (Participant Interview, September 22, 2022). This student came from a global minority country which does not have high uptake of the 2030 Agenda at the national level nor spends much funding SDG implementation. They were an early career professional with no UN contact through their previous work. They were, however, extremely aware of the visual representations of the goals and could name many of the 17 goals by heart. Here we can see that some students, especially those without previous contact with UN agencies granting legitimacy to the SDGs, could learn about them at WMU, without fully understanding from where they derive.

5.1.4. *Capacity Building and Collections*

There is a secondary factor at work in creating the belief system of WMU and that is the role of capacity building and collections. While the SDGs were not added to the school mission statement and thus the school culture until 2015, the role of capacity building has been at the heart of the aim of WMU since its creation in 1983. The UN defines capacity building as:

... the process of developing and strengthening the skills, instincts, abilities, processes and resources that organizations and communities need to survive, adapt, and thrive in a fast-changing world. An essential ingredient in capacity-building is transformation that is generated and sustained over time from within;

transformation of this kind goes beyond performing tasks to changing mindsets and attitudes.⁷

It is this type of transformation of individual, or mindset change, which Dr. Doumbia-Henry referenced in her inauguration speech and which is present in the act of the students putting on the SDG pin. Because of their mandate for capacity building, the student body of WMU comes mostly from global majority countries or developing nations. Most students receive scholarships to attend and are expected to return home after their studies and use their newly acquired knowledge to strengthen their home nations. Capacity building is about moving knowledge and funds from one place to another, but also about moving mindsets.

Across the campus at WMU material traces of the diversity of the student body are present. Members of the Registry department where I was housed during my fieldwork have collections in their offices of small tokens or gifts received from students over the years. These gifts are of low monetary value and usually represent the home nations of the students giving them. In the top floor Bistro where students and staff eat lunch is a larger collection of gifted items (see Figures 10 and 11). During interviews students spoke of standing in line for lunch and looking at the collection, noticing if their home nation was represented. I see these collections of items as both celebration of the diversity of the student body, but also a way to further both the importance of and show reverence to the act of capacity building. Instead of framing their enrollment at WMU as one of necessity (our home country needs this maritime knowledge and I must go and acquire it) there is an aspect of deference to the act of leaving home to ultimately do something good for others. These students are not here on their own, for their own gain, they are here representing their host nations as agents of capacity building. Leaving behind a small gift which represents their home country is not the same as a framed picture of themselves. By leaving a flag, doll, or small trinket which represents their country they are marking that they and their country are a part of this larger endeavor or capacity building.

⁷<https://www.un.org/en/academic-impact/capacity-building>



Figure 10: The "altar" by the World Bistro.



Figure 11: Close up of the collection or "altar".

When asked about this collection of gifts by the bistro many students referred to it as an altar, another example of how this belief system has elements of the sacred, despite being secular. One student noted that "...we are getting to know another culture just by standing there and doing nothing. So I better have something to attract people to [informant's home country]" (Current Student interview, February 27, 2023). All current students I interviewed admitted that they had taken time to look at the collection and all acknowledged checking to see if their home country was represented. One student explained that their home nation was "already represented and I don't need to leave anything" (Current Student interview, March 7, 2023). We can see this altar to the act of capacity building as another aspect of the belief system of WMU. As WMU was ultimately created to be an agent of capacity building, the belief in the value of that endeavor is central to the institution and seems to be passing to most members of the student body. While some nations have had many students attend and graduate throughout the years, all students I interviewed agreed with the statement that "having representation of my own nation on campus matters to me as an individual" (Fieldnotes, February and March 2023). It is difficult to gauge whether all students leave WMU with mindset change, but one way to investigate this is through their understanding of what these collections of gifts represent and their individual participation in this practice. As with the putting on of the SDG pin, the participation in the gifting and creating of an altar to the practice of capacity building speaks to an uptake of the belief system more generally.

The discussion of these collections of gifts is enhanced by the discussion of agency, through the work of philosopher Jane Bennett. In her book, *Vibrant Matter* she explores the concept of *agency of assemblages* or the power of collections of things, both human and non-human, when considered beyond their typical meanings or purposes (Bennett, 2010). The power of these collections of small trinkets and flags is much greater than any of their individual parts, especially when combined with the bodies of the students themselves. The collections of gifts work to legitimize the presence of the students and give them the feeling that they belong there, despite being so far from home and what is familiar.

The altar or collection signals the presence of students past and references the mission of capacity building as being successful. The student body combined with the staff of the University is an assemblage in itself, pointing to the "coexistence of mutual dependency" of each role (Bennett, 2010, p. 23) But the combination of the students, the staff, and the items

gifted creates a new agency which tells the students both “you are here and not home” but also “you belong and are welcome” (Fieldnotes, October 6, 2022 and March 20, 2023). Each time a new gift or student is added to campus, the assemblage is expanded and its agency changes. Without the gifts, the colorful representations of so many different countries, it might be easy to forget the mandate for capacity building, or to become entirely engulfed in a homogenized version of a UN culture trickling down to WMU. These items represent more and do more for and to students than they would immediately seem to. I asked students about the collections and if they meant anything other than “some students brought this here.” Across the board, in all interviews with current students, the answer was a version of “the collections tell me I am welcome here too.” (Fieldnotes and informal interviews, various days.)

All together, the imposing building signaling a connection to the past with a gaze towards the future, the formality of ritual and rites of passage into an understanding of the school mission, and the joyful chaos of the collections of materiality, both gifts and students, make up the belief system of WMU. My fieldwork and analysis leads me to conclude that most students accept and “buy-in” to this belief system on some level. Through participation in ritual or signaling through materiality, most, one could never say all, “believe” in the WMU mission and in their role towards achieving it. No student expressed to me that they did not see themselves as helping to achieve said mission, although, as stated earlier, some did not fully understand where certain ideas or concepts derived. Students who were coming to WMU from the global majority tended to take more seriously the aspect of capacity building, which is understandable if not a place for improvement.

5.2. Belonging

In tracing the elements of the belief system around the WMU mission, we can see how different actors within the network have different roles in creating it. The framing and defining of what the mission statement, and thus belief system is and how it can be achieved is a strong top-down imposition, not an act of co-creation or collaboration. The students are the ones indoctrinated into the belief by the administration and faculty. Although as discussed earlier, many students might already have an affinity towards this belief based on their prior connection to UN networks or familiarity with capacity building programs in their home communities.

In the following section I trace the action and friction taking place at the bottom of this hierarchy. Not the formal ritual of welcoming the students to WMU or presenting the school mission from an institutional perspective, but the informal work taking place at the individual level which plays a larger role in creating believers within this belief system. This is, to be frank, the dirty work, creating a sense of belonging.

5.2.1. *Cooperation*

On its surface, belief in the WMU mission appears to be a homogenous belief. The school mission, capacity building and the achievement of the SDGs, are one specific thing, and their achievement is tied to quantifiable indicators. Belief in the mission includes belief in the authority of the institutions which produced both the mission statement and text of the 2030 Agenda, as well as agreement on the actions required to complete the Agenda. Power flows down from the top to the students at the bottom, imposing a system of belief which many are primed to take part in, based on their previous exposure to UN institutions and work. This is reflected in my interviews with WMU graduates. An informant from the global majority who works closely with the IMO and UN lays out this connection: “Each of these SDGs has a role...It derives from the UN, comes to the IMO, and from the IMO comes to WMU. So the network is easily understood when you arrive to WMU” (Alumni interview, October 1, 2022). This proximity to the UN structure is also expressed as a shared value system expressed by another informant from the global majority working within the same networks: “...all the students feel the same values and just adopt them...You have to have this very global mindset if you want to have success in policymaking. Yes. Everything has to be connected to the goals” (Alumni interview, October 19, 2022). Thus we can see WMU as producing more people who can speak this language, who understand the mission in the same way, and work in a similar fashion towards its achievement.

Belonging, however, a second outcome of the ritual of joining and believing in the WMU mission, is found not at the top of this existing power structure and flowing downwards, but from inside, in multi-directions. My analysis shows that belonging is what the students speak of when they mention the new skills they acquired while studying at WMU. It is the skill of cooperation, the action of collaboration which produces belonging and it is not gained without work or friction. Through my interviews a similar theme of new skills, past those they expected to acquire at WMU, came up. All interviews I conducted

contained some mention of gaining skills past those from classes and curriculum, but gained through student-to-student interaction.

As a group of students, each graduating class comes to Malmö with varied career and cultural backgrounds. All informants noted that they were aware of the diversity of the student body before arriving and most noted that this was a particular draw for them. During one interview with a student from an EU country, meaning they were in the global minority but also the minority of the student body, stated that the diversity was a particular draw: “And, you know, making it (the student body) more diverse from all around the world made a better feeling for me because, you know, communicating with countries that are more developed or less developed or developing was good...because there are no countries that stopped developing” (Alumni interview, October 2, 2022). Here the informant showed the value they perceived in working and studying with people from different backgrounds as them. To them, no country is finished developing thus there is always more to learn as students and more to share as colleagues in the industry. Another informant also from the global minority expressed similar enthusiasm for attending a school with such a diverse student body: “Like there there's no other way I would've met these people had I not gone to this school. So it was kind of...that kind of sealed the deal. Cause it was just such a unique experience” (Alumni interview, September 16, 2022). This informant expressed that they ultimately choose WMU over other opportunities because they realized the chance to study abroad with such a diverse student body was one they did not want to pass up, it held value to them as an element of the education they believed they would receive. A final informant put this expectation of diversity within the student body and the causes of that diversity fairly matter-of-factly:

It has been emphasized since the first day that we arrived here, particularly the inauguration and throughout the academic year. That diversity is, uh, is one of the major aspects of WMU, maybe particularly because the maritime sector is being driven mostly by developing countries. That's why we have that kind of diversity over here. And of course, and then cultural exchange is becoming like, popular over here. (Current Student interview, March 10, 2023)

While this student did not outwardly, through expression or word choice give value to this diversity, they showed that they were not surprised by it.

This diversity within the student body and organization itself (WMU graduates and staff represent 177 nations) does not automatically translate to an enriched academic experience. Much research has been done on the impact of diversity on societies, communities and organizations, both in education and beyond. The American political scientist Robert Putnam is well known for his theory that increased diversity of societies leads to individuals “hunkering down” instead of becoming more connected: “Diversity seems to trigger not in-group/out-group division, but anomie or social isolation. In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to ‘hunker down’– that is, to pull in like a turtle” (Putnam, 2007, p. 149). This research looks at societies over organizations and is not directly applicable to the WMU student body, but it can be considered in this study nonetheless. According to my conversations with faculty and students there have been individuals who came to WMU and felt overwhelmed by the constant negotiations of deference and demeanor, different styles of communication, and general navigation of different personalities. This is to be expected in any organization or student body, that some members will not thrive in the institutional culture, but the hope is that the majority finds a way to be successful. I see the same outcome at WMU. Different staff and faculty could recall certain students over the years who had difficulty, who might have pulled into their turtle shell to hunker down, but this is not the majority. While hunkering down is itself an action, one of withdrawal, it is the action of pushing through these frictions present in the way the students communicate which I believe creates a sense of belonging.

Students spoke to me of the frictions present in working together. Here a student from a global majority country spoke of the pressures and stresses of working with others for group projects:

And speaking of challenges, one of the challenging aspects of the course is the group work... you are trying to, to work with fellow students with different cultures, different backgrounds, I think different points of view, different stress level and different sense of urgency. However, these challenges for me, it, it provides me, uh, it provides me a positive way to gain one important skills. And that is the skill of diplomacy, patience, communication and leadership. And these traits hold the students to improve their leadership and managerial skills... sometimes we had a group study, then you're waiting for, you're waiting for, your classmates to be, uh, to join you. So you cannot force him or her to join you. So all you have to do is to be

patient. You understand them. So it's okay for me. So you, you practice your skill of diplomacy. (Alumni interview, October 7, 2022)

They are clearly aware that they gained new skills by negotiating these differences and these skills were not taught in a classroom. Another student from a global minority country noted:

So, um, I was the port management rep for the student government. And so, uh, from what I remember, we had, we had a really good group of people in the council from time to time, we would have, uh, disagreements, but, uh, for the most part, we would try to get stuff done. I think the biggest thing was student council was adjusting for, um, cultural preferences. If that's the, the PC word because this person, you know, is very religious and Christian and you have somebody who's absolutely not a Christian, you know, that's not, that's, they're not, they're not Christian, you know, they they're Muslim and see when you would open up. Like, yeah, we had, we had some hurdles we had to adjust. So, kind of being mindful of traditions of people, how you engage people. (Alumni Interview, September 16, 2022)

Again, this informant was aware of the work being done in order to negotiate through differences in order to work together.

In addition to diversity of geographic and cultural backgrounds, the students also had a diversity of previous careers and educations. This difference was another source of friction which needed to be overcome through active negotiation and cooperation. One informant who came from a global majority nation with a background in environmental management and botany came to WMU to advance their career prospects. They were aware that they did not have the same maritime focused career background as other students:

I come from a scientific background... I came in as somebody who had a theoretical background. I'm not a seafarer. But now, I can proudly say that I am a maritime administrator. So I, I learned, I learned from their [other students'] experiences because they would share their experiences on board [ships] and then what happened in the middle of the ocean. My time at Malmö, I must say that it was worthwhile in a sense that you interact with different cultures with different nationalities and then it builds your profile and then resilience in terms of who can you interact with. And then it also builds my profile in terms of diplomatic communication as well. It taught me to

communicate at all levels of nationality to be able to make cognizant sense of other people's cultures. Maritime issues are international by nature. (Alumni interview, October 22, 2022)

Here we can see this student as recognizing that they did not have as much in common with other students at first, both in terms of shared culture or shared work background, but by graduation they believed they worked through both of those differences and gained a better understanding of the different aspects of the maritime field as well as new skills of diplomacy and cooperation across cultures. Another student from a global majority nation felt the same, about coming to WMU as a non-seafarer:

I don't come from a seafarer background. I have a law background... Whenever they show like some equipment, I was like, I know it from books, but I've never seen it. So to have the perspective from other people actually using them [ships and equipment]... uh, it's how I learn additionally from them [other students.] (Current student interview, February 27, 2023)

Again we can see that the students are learning from each other's varied career backgrounds as well as cultural backgrounds.

This practice of learning from one another can be seen both as an action by students trying to learn from and work with one another, but also as a practice of earning authority. Authority, to Sennett is "power endowed with legitimacy" (Sennett, 2012, p. 151). I return to the discussion of legitimacy, previously addressed in terms of the SDGs and the school mission statement, and want to show how through the action of cooperating together and navigating these before mentioned differences, the students earn authority from one another and this pushes them to further become agents of legitimacy for the school mission. The students, who might not see one another as agents of legitimacy or even as equals based on their previous careers or cultural backgrounds, earn legitimacy from each other through the actions of diplomatic communication and sharing knowledge.

This happens at a peer-to-peer level, meaning students to students, but also happens from top to bottom, from professors to students, as illustrated by an informant from a global majority nation. Here he is describing a former professor from his masters program at WMU introducing him to new staff after he returned to pursue a PhD:

So his words are still in my mind, he was telling them, “You see this is [name redacted] and for part of [their] thesis [they] were my student, and for part of [their] thesis, [they] were my teacher.” He was telling the professors. I told him, “You are very humble.” “No. He said,” It's not, it's not a matter of being humble, but this is the truth. You know, when you are studying something at some point, you will become more specialized than other people. So you will be specialized in, in this area, then we will learn from you.” Also, he said, also, “you came from a practical part.” Cause I was a port manager and I was doing a practical job. So he said, “Frankly speaking, I was learning from you. (Alumni interview, September 30, 2022)

The fact that the professor acknowledged that he was learning from this student both surprised the student but also made them more connected to the idea that they were a part of fulfilling the mission of the school. The professor earned authority from the student by acknowledging the student's expertise which in turn, increased the student's belief in the work of the school (Sennett, 2012, p. 151).

Cooperation, as these students eventually believe they have accomplished, happened in a space which was informal and bred empathy over sympathy. Outside of the formalized ritual events at the school such as the inauguration and graduation, the students struggled through the frictions present in their differing backgrounds. In these informal spaces of group work and life in the residence hall they earned respect and authority from each other which increased their participation in the system of belief connected to the SDGs and the school mission. As noted earlier, this process was not without friction. The result is not so much homogenization, but an understanding that the texture of this connection, of students from all over the globe with different backgrounds and capabilities was never smooth to begin with. These students share different goals and strategies and most seem to recognize that working with diversity instead of flattening it produced a positive outcome (Tsing, 2011).

While in some ways WMU and the UN would like to convey the idea that cooperation within the organization is frictionless, the lived experiences of the students show that it is not. Striving towards these shared universals happens through friction and the process of realizing this is valuable as a take away for the students. Repeatedly they acknowledged the value-added nature of this new skillset. The process taught them to sit with discomfort as part of solving a problem, that problems might not even be solved at all, but connections can be made (Sennett, 2012; Tsing, 2011).



Figure 12 WMU Choir singing at the Graduation Ceremony.

5.2.2. *Graduation*

As part of the graduation ceremony, a highly ritualized and formal event, the WMU student choir, made of current students, sings the WMU song. Lyrics include “World Maritime University, far away from home, different cultures, different languages, but we never feel alone...sharing knowledge and experience...voice for the whole wide world, Cooperation we achieve.” While wearing ceremonial dress from their home nations and cultures, the students danced together in choreographed gestures which were connected to the lyrics. During the bridge of the song where there was no singing, the students took turns dancing, using gestures and steps native to their own cultures. The students themselves chose what steps or moves to perform. In the midst of this formal setting, where all graduates wore identical gowns and all professors were clad in gowns and regalia from their home institutions designating rank and accomplishment, this dash of flair and informality felt both refreshing and rouge. It challenged the formality of the event, the clear hierarchy of persons in attendance, and feels joyful. It may be understood as an acknowledgement of the diversity of the student body, the friction between all the cultures present, and a pushback against

homogeneity. Even the lyrics of the song mention struggle and difficulties, but acknowledge that cooperation was achieved. The lyrics were written by two former WMU students for the 10th Anniversary celebration in 1993. This shows that students striving towards cooperation is a key tenet of WMU and students have noticed this cooperation at the peer level even from the early years of the institution, when the SDGs were not yet created or incorporated into the mission statement.

5.3. The Workshop

A final exploration of the mission statement of WMU as a system of belief can be made through studying a workshop held at WMU on October 25, 2022. I will show the elements of this belief system, the ritual and formality, the strong top-down imposition plus the peer-to-peer cooperation at the bottom of this hierarchy. This time, however, there will be new players on the same stage. This will allow me to investigate and make clear which elements of this belief system contribute to uptake of beliefs, and which require specific conditions to be successful. As with earlier descriptions of events at WMU, this workshop can be seen as a ritual. There are specific phases of separation, transition, and incorporation. There is specific iconography and use of symbols to convey meaning. Finally, there is expression and repetition. All as shown in earlier sections of this thesis, but now with new students, non-WMU students. Students from outside of the WMU/IMO/UN networks.

This workshop was titled “UN Day Workshop – Youth Ambassadors for Sustainability” and is a yearly event hosted at WMU for high school students from the local Malmö Latinskola. This event is held to recognize United Nations Day which commemorates the day the UN was founded (October 24, 1945.) In addition to 32 high school students from Malmö Latinskola, there were 7 PhD students from the Global Oceans Institute. The Global Oceans Institute or GOI is an interdisciplinary research arm of WMU and focuses on SDG goal 14: Life Underwater. In particular it focuses on research related to Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) meaning areas beyond the borders of individual nations coastlines and is an extremely relevant topic connected to the SDGs as so much of climate change will affect and be affected by the health of the oceans.

Unlike the earlier mentioned conference on the Stockholm Declaration and London Protocol hosted by the IMO and WMU, (see section 5.1 Belief) this event included students from outside of the UN network, without pre-existing belief in or proximity to the UN/IMO/WMU network. Thus it can be assumed that unlike the previous conference

participants, these “youth ambassadors” from Malmö Latinskola did not see WMU as an agent of legitimacy for the Sustainable Development Goals. It should be noted that all students who participated already were aware of the SDGs on some level as their high school curriculum includes the concept and visuals (Fieldnotes, October 25, 2022). Sweden is one of the countries which has adopted the 2030 Agenda and SDGs into their national policy.

As I arrived for the workshop I passed the group of high schoolers waiting outside the WMU main building. They sat on low walls around the public areas outside of the school, leaned against the building itself. Their bodies and demeanor exuded a general air of informality which to me seemed to point towards disinterest and fatigue. These students had not longed to enter this building, had not done substantial work to attain admission to the school and country through a long application and visa process. For these students, this building was just one of many buildings they routinely saw in Malmö, perhaps without thought as to what goes on inside. I asked the few students willing to speak to me at this point (the workshop had not started yet and some of the students did not feel compelled to talk to me at all) if they recognized the UN flag flying outside of the WMU building, next to a flag of the city of Malmö. Some recognized it but did not know what it meant. Again, I feel safe assuming that for most WMU students the flag of the UN means more than it did for the students visiting from the Latinskola. Proximity to the belief system of the UN and WMU matters in terms of how iconography is read and what weight it is granted.

Soon the high school students entered WMU and were led to the classroom being used for the workshop. Here we can see these new students separating from the Malmö they know and the routine of going into their own high school building, into a space (the interior of WMU) which they were unfamiliar with. The rite of passage ritual had begun. While still appearing tired (the workshop began at 8:30am on a Tuesday) they found seats as far from the front of the room as possible, with the unlucky few entering the room last being forced to sit closest to the front. I saw this as a sign of disinterest in the workshop’s subject or an indication the students wanted to feel safe in the back of the room, farthest from the unknown to them WMU students and staff.

Once all Malmö Latinskola students were seated representatives from the Global Oceans Institute began introducing the work that they did, the uniqueness of being the only UN agency inside of Sweden, and the SDGs as a concept and the subject of the workshop. It was here that I observed further evidence of the high school students’ lack of “buy-in” to the WMU mission. While the top-down imposition of the WMU culture works fairly well for the incoming WMU students as they are primed for uptake based on familiarity with capacity

building programs and UN projects in their home communities, the high school students were not receiving it well. They were not impressed that WMU is a UN agency and they did not buy-into the belief system because they were not, and would likely not be a part of it. While different PhD students and staff continued talking about their areas of research, I saw the high school students begin to drift off. An element of “talking down to children” was also at play, and perhaps meeting these teenagers with a degree of equality would have encouraged them to listen more closely or become more quickly engage with the topic. Here we can see the element of formality not being successful with these particular participants. These students are much younger than the incoming WMU students and are perhaps tired of being treated as children, an element of this workshop which cannot be ignored in the discussion of power structures at play. Just because we told the students the work being done at WMU “mattered” does not mean it will automatically matter to them. No action had been done to help them along towards this belief, only rhetoric and speeches. Without prior connection to this mission these students felt disconnected.



Figure 13: Materials provided to create a poster at UN Day Workshop.

After the introductions and initial presentations were finished the high school students were divided into groups with the PhD students from WMU. Each group was given a topic including “Climate change and sustainability,” “Sustainable use of the ocean and marine resources,” and “Marine debris and ocean pollution.” The goal was for the “youth ambassadors,” the high schoolers, to ask questions to the “experts,” the PhD students and to make a poster illustrating their ideas and findings. Each group was given materials and implements to help them create this poster. (see Figure 13). Here I saw an obvious shift of

power, from the high schoolers being spoken to about what they should care about, to more equal footing where students were talking to other students. The high schoolers were still shy about talking to the PhD students, but through prompting they eventually began to open up dialog. Despite the PhD students being very kind and working hard to explain difficult concepts, the high schoolers were still not entirely enthusiastic, except to show that they were participating for the sake of their teacher and their own class evaluation.

At this point, the discussions between the high schoolers to other high schoolers was free flowing. This is understandable as they already knew each other from class and were the same ages and cultural backgrounds. They were given scissors, markers and crayons, glue sticks, and brochures and magazines from which to create a collage which would be accompanied by their written ideas.

It was here, when action was inserted into the process of cooperation, that the high schoolers began to truly interact with the workshop and participants beyond their fellow high schoolers (Sennett, 2012). Working together they assigned different roles: “I want to write, I hate drawing” (UN Day Youth Ambassador Workshop fieldnotes, October 24, 2022). They surprised each other by exhibiting skills they had not previously done together: “Who drew that turtle? It is really good!” “I didn’t know you could draw!” (UN Day Youth Ambassador Workshop fieldnotes, October 24, 2022). The action of crafting a poster full of drawings, collage, and written ideas also created a space of livelier and freer flowing conversation. Students who previously had shown me deference asked me to go get them a glue stick. Some teased the PhD students who tried to use Swedish to ask for different colored markers. In that specific moment, the experts or PhD students were not experts in Swedish and roles shifted creating more comfort for all participants, but also encouraging the high schoolers to take part as they finally felt the presence of a space for them to show some expertise.

Most importantly, through the addition of action and crafting the students also began to interact with the ideas the workshop centered around as well. By the end of the workshop it became clear that despite their earlier physical expressions of disinterest, many of the high schoolers were extremely passionate about these topics; preserving ocean biodiversity, addressing climate change, and the universals of the SDGs more generally. There was an interesting discussion about what parts of Malmö might be affected by rising sea levels, some students pointing out they had relatives living in areas which might be particularly affected “Västra Hamnen will be underwater soon!” and asking me and other facilitators where we lived (UN Day Youth Ambassador Workshop fieldnotes, October 24, 2022). It was clear that the students cared deeply about these issues, but they needed to be approached in specific

ways, specifically not in the top-down way which opened the workshop. One student quietly wondered to me if older people just don't care because issues like climate change will not affect them so severely. This student absolutely agreed with the mission of the Sustainable Development Goals, but was tired of being shown "that colorful wheel" over and over without seeing "real action" by "grown ups" (UN Day Youth Ambassador Workshop fieldnotes, October 24, 2022). It is possible this student will never see WMU or the UN as legitimate or effective agents of implementation for the Sustainable Development Goals, but they clearly believe in the legitimacy of the ideas as a whole. The legitimizing agent here, for this student, can be seen as the issue's proximity to the student's life and the affect it will have on it.



Figure 14: Latinskola Students presenting their posters at the conclusion of the workshop.

At the end of the presentation each group of Malmö Latinskola presented their own posters (see Figure 14). Here I observed a final shift in power dynamics. Based on their physical demeanor and expression I concluded that most students did not mind presenting and speaking in front of the group when presenting their posters. Some were less comfortable speaking in English than others, and there were quick internal group discussions before each presentation of who would speak and when. Unlike earlier when each group was forced to ask the PhD students about the research projects they were working on (these questions were not enthusiastically offered and often through their asking, made obvious that the Latinskola students did not fully understand what the PhD students had spoken about) the students described their posters with enthusiasm. They offered connections between their suggestions

and ideas to those of the PhD students and showed how they had eventually cooperated within their group. The friction caused by working together, negotiating from hierarchy to individual-to-individual cooperation successfully worked through these now shared universals to move the mindsets of the Latinskola. They had made the connection of how they were connected to these universals as well. All phases of the rite of passage had been passed, and while they did not put on a pin, I observed them to also now incorporate, in the sense of both believing and belonging to, the universals of the WMU mission.

One lesson to be learned from this workshop is that it should not be taken for granted that everyone participating should or will automatically buy-in to the belief system surrounding the school's mission statement. Belief that the UN/IMO/WMU network has the authority to lead the way on global goals such as the SDGs is not a given. Proximity to the UN network matters, as I have repeatedly noted. I mention once more the student coming to WMU from a country with less cooperation with the UN who thought WMU created the SDGs themselves. If one is not already fluent in the language of the SDGs it is harder to believe in a belief system built around them. Students who already know the work of the UN and the SDGs and have seen the positive outcomes of capacity building projects in their communities and workplaces are more ready to cooperate towards achieving the mission. They more easily see their work connected to this greater endeavor.

It should be noted that most of the PhD students participating in this workshop from WMU are from the global majority, specifically Caribbean nations which are already being dramatically affected by climate change. This influenced their own choice of studies and became a place where the Malmö Latinskola students could find shared understanding. The students from Latinskola are also aware that their lives will be affected by rising sea levels. This point of commonality was more effective in producing cooperation than sharing a general belief that climate change is negative.

From this workshop we can see so clearly the truth of Richard Sennett's theory of cooperation, that it is a physical act, a process, an action and not a smooth naturally occurring state. It takes effort and it takes practice (Sennett, 2008, 2012). There was no cooperation between the speakers and the high schoolers at the beginning of the workshop. The formality of the address and clear top-down imposition of culture did not work. Once we moved to an informal space of conversation without such rigorous hierarchy the high schoolers began by working together as a peer-group and then progressed to working with those "above them" as well. Through working towards a shared end goal as a group, cooperation grew out of the collective action. By the end of the workshop all participating high school students agreed

with the statement “these issues matter to me” (UN Day Youth Ambassador Workshop fieldnotes, October 24, 2022).

6. *Applications and Conclusion*

6.1. Main findings

The main findings from my fieldwork and subsequent analysis led me to conclude that there is a belief system created around the school mission and the 2030 Agenda at WMU. It is a top-down system driven by the UN and flowing through the administration and faculty of the school. This belief system includes ritual elements, especially rituals related to rites of passage. Materiality, style of rhetoric, and demeanor are used by those at the top of this system to attempt to spread the values contained in this belief to new students entering the network. Uptake of this belief is not universal and can be connected to the student’s prior connection to the UN network. Students who come to WMU with a belief in the legitimacy of the UN, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs or the concepts of capacity building tend to have stronger uptake of the WMU mission and their part in its accomplishment.

More importantly, students graduating from WMU do so with a perception that through their time there, they acquired more skills than those gained through classroom instruction or their own fieldsite visits. All students I interviewed perceived that by being a student and working and living with other students they gained skills of diplomacy and an ability to work through the friction created by their varied backgrounds. They learned to move past places of difference and find common ground. Mainly, the students I interviewed connected this new skillset to the achievement of the school’s mission. It is here that we can analyze the uptake of the belief by all students, not just those with a UN connection. By being able to successfully cooperate with those who are not like themselves, they can, as individuals, be a part of making larger programs such as capacity building or the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals successful. To me, this puts the focus on the importance of the individual within such large-scale programs attempting to affect change for so many humans across the globe.

It is the action of cooperation and moving through friction which makes the students stronger “believers” in the mission of WMU. This action balances the strong top-down nature of the mission imposed by WMU by providing the perception of skill building and agency at the “bottom”. This reinforces the feeling of inclusion and fosters continued belief.

6.2. *Applicability*

In organizations, especially spaces of education and those connected to the work of the SDGs, attention must be paid to the balance between a strong top-down imposition of culture, and the inner peer-to-peer community. Highlighting the differences in the students' backgrounds as an asset gave the feeling of legitimacy to share their perspective. It helped them to not be afraid of meeting friction in the practice of cooperation. By taking away the expectation that collaboration between people with different backgrounds should be seamless, students were more willing to struggle through difficulties in communication. This type of skill building is especially important to work supporting the SDGs, both target 4.7,⁸ related to education and the teaching of the Sustainable Development Goals and 17.6,⁹ related to continued capacity building through established UN networks, and should be explicitly mentioned in the text of those goals. Moving funds and knowledge must be supported by moving mindsets and increasing the success of cross-culture communication.

6.3. *Conclusion*

It is easy to assume that all humans will readily agree that striving towards universals and global aspirations such as world peace, ending hunger, education for all, universal human rights will be agreed upon and smooth to achieve. But this assumption is naïve and fails to recognize how complex and varied the understanding of these issues can be. In attempting to help all of humanity, these universals and those creating them often fail to recognize the individuals who make up this humanity itself. I do not argue that large global development efforts should be stopped or maligned for failing to recognize all the situated understandings, wants and desires of each individual human on this earth. Much good has been done by many different organizations with good and honest intentions. I argue instead that the action at the very bottom of these large-scale efforts, the individual to individual cooperation to move from friction to understanding, is the most relevant factor in making them successful. The individual is what makes these global connections and universals matter and the agency each

⁸ By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development. Source: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal4#targets_and_indicators

⁹ Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, in particular at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism Source: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal17>

individual perceives they have in helping achieve these universals is the fuel which can ultimately make them a reality. By fostering the peer-to-peer cooperation within these global programs, we foster the belief that the individual has a part to play, not just large organizations or funding agencies, but each individual involved. Thus I can say that teaching individuals to cooperate, letting them learn to work through friction, is a skillset utterly necessary to the success of these endeavors.



Figure 15: Malmö: Latinskola students using SDG blocks as a table for fika..

For all the money and time spent on branding the SDGs and making them into blocks used at different times and events to signify the goals, there will always be those who misinterpret, or are not moved by those symbols. At the workshop at WMU Malmö Latinskola students used a stack of SDG blocks as a table during their fika break (see Figure 15). While recognizing the ridiculousness of these very serious issues depicted on something now serving to hold their coffee and cake, these students were still able to believe in and value the concepts they represented. There are different ways of asking people to join, to serve, to help a cause. Going forward I believe more attention must be paid to how we ask, who we ask, and who is considered invaluable in those endeavors. Endlessly mobilizing money and knowledge around the world will not help unless it also mobilizes minds. My research points to the most basic building block, the skill of cooperation across differences, which truly mobilizes the mind and heart towards achieving the universal.

7. References and Interviews

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Appendix A

Interview Questions used for WMU Voices project

I generally followed this order but varied if the specific interview dictated.

- Tell me about your career before attending WMU?
 - How did you choose to apply to WMU?
 - What did you know about WMU before you attended?
 - Describe your experience as a student at WMU.
 - What surprised you /what is something about WMU that you did not expect?
 - Describe your impressions of the building.
 - What did you gain here that you find valuable?
 - Are you familiar with the SDGs? (*I would then show a photo of the SDGs, see Figure 1*)
- If the informant was not familiar with them I would move on.*

Interview Questions for Current Students:

- Tell me about your career before attending WMU.
- How did you choose to apply to WMU?
- What did you know about WMU before you attended?
- Describe your experience as a student at WMU.
- What surprised you /what is something about WMU that you did not expect?
- Describe your impressions of the building.
- Are you familiar with the collection of items upstairs at the Bistro?
- What do you think of the collection?