

## Taking a Joint Master Degree

We met Amanda Österlin La Mont, currently at UN-Habitat in Nairobi, Kenya, and asked her about her experiences of studying on an international Joint Master Program.



*What program did you study?*

I followed an international multidisciplinary Joint Master Program (JMP) named Creative Sustainability at Aalto University in Helsinki, Finland. The program is a platform to work with sustainable development, in a more interdisciplinary way and in broader collaboration than we usually do in society today. The program lets students with different background work together with various practical societal challenges linked to sustainable development. For the program the students are applying to various faculties of the Aalto University, based on their background - design, economics, architecture, engineering. In the program you study courses in different modules ranging from general compulsory modules where everyone learns about the basics of global challenges, sustainable development and transformation work to discipline specific modules where you study sustainable development related to your own discipline. In addition to these modules, you have to choose from a variety of elective courses at Aalto University, both courses related to sustainable development and others. Many courses are project or case based, and together we apply our knowledge to a practical problem. During my two years of study, I studied, in addition to the required courses in systems thinking, interdisciplinary cooperation and sustainable development, courses related to sustainable design and business, design management and creative methods of leadership and facilitation in the transition to a sustainable development. One example is a project in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, where we worked on affordable construction methods with a local NGO and former slum-dwellers who were building up a new community. Our project team continued the work with this community after the studies were finished. Follow this link to see the projects blog: <https://letsgotochamazi.wordpress.com/>

My background is a Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Design at the Faculty of Engineering, Lund University. During my studies at this program, I studied topics related to strategic product development and design-driven innovation. During the study period, we got a broad base of subjects like engineering, physics, design methodology, sketching and drawing techniques, ergonomics, design management, etc. Much of the studies were project based where working with design projects based on a given mission individually or in groups. During my graduation project, I chose to specialize in the field of eco-design. Eco-design deals with how the choice of material, design and various user aspects can optimize a product or service from an environmental perspective.

*A Joint Master Program - what is it?*

A JMP is an interdisciplinary program in which several faculties or universities are joining forces to offer a broad training platform for students from different backgrounds. It can either be within the same university, as in my case, where four faculties of the Aalto University joined forces and created an interdisciplinary Master program, Creative Sustainability, or it can also be by several universities which merge and combine their skill sets in one Master program.

*Is the JMP different from a conventional master program?*

I have not studied a conventional master program, but would say that the biggest difference is that students have more choices in course offerings in the JMP, and thus a greater influence on what skills you will have as a graduate. You can thus specialize in an area that does not offer a full Master program, but also have more opportunity to choose a breadth of courses and study with a width of fellow students to broaden everyone's perspective.

*What made you choose this program instead of a conventional master program?*

After my bachelor in industrial design, I was interested to continue to specialize in design for sustainable development. I found no such Master I was eligible to apply for in Sweden - most of them were very technical - so I decided to look internationally. I thought that the Creative Sustainability program was very interesting because it gives a much broader perspective to design than as a method of service and product development. Design is traditionally a discipline that in many ways is multidisciplinary because many different areas of knowledge are required in a development process. As a designer you have to be able to speak and understand many different languages; manufacturers, behavioral specialists, engineers, users, etc. Therefore, I saw the multidisciplinary set up of the program as a way to strengthen this part of my design profile, with the focus on sustainable development and management. I also shared the program's idea that we, as a society, have to find new ways to acquire knowledge and solve problems, through a broader collaboration between disciplines, in order to tackle the complex challenges related to sustainable development.

*What are the advantages of studying on a JMP?*

You get the opportunity to broaden the perspective of your own discipline and its role in a larger system. To practice multidisciplinary cooperation with all its challenges - different languages, world views and perceptions of what the "problem" is. I believe these are learning experiences that are absolutely crucial when it comes to working with sustainable development.

*Would you recommend other students join a JMP?*

Absolutely! But you should be aware that it is challenging to study a JMP as you are forced to make many critical choices and plan your studies throughout the study period. It is very much up to you how your studies develop - either as a mix of hard-to-combine courses and projects, or a valuable whole in which you both develop your own previous background and broaden your future career possibilities.