

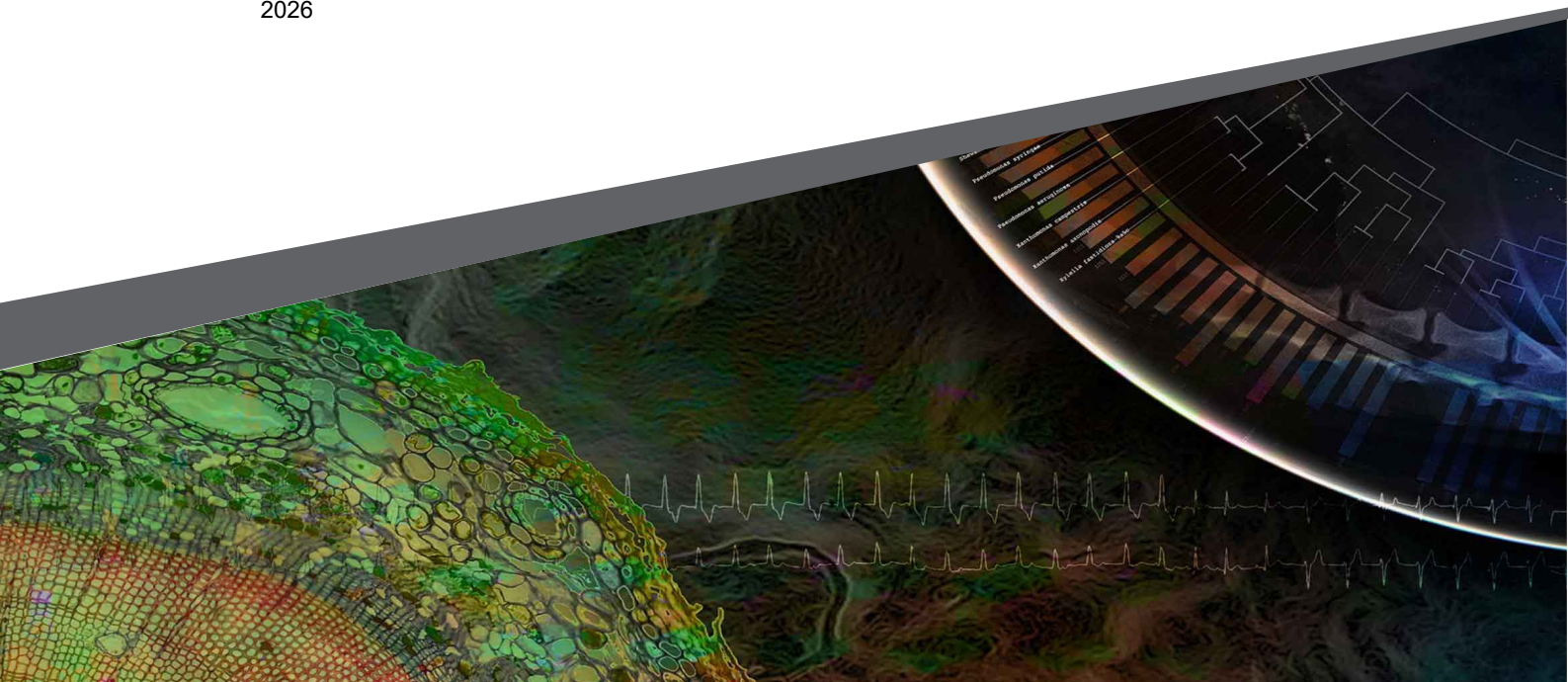


Dialogue at SLU

Mapping the Landscape, Challenges, and
Pathways Forward

Matthew Kessler

SLU Future Food
Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, SLU
2026



Dialogue at SLU. Mapping the Landscape, Challenges, and Pathways Forward

Matthew Kessler, SLU Future Food

Publisher: SLU Future Food, Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Year of publication: 2026

© 2026 The authors

This publication is licensed under [CC BY ND 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/). Other licences or copyright may apply to illustrations.

Content

1. Background	4
Exploring Dialogue as a Working Method	4
Why Universities Want Dialogue, and Why They Struggle With It.....	5
2. Examples of Dialogue Activities at SLU	6
Dialogue in action	8
What these initiatives share – and where they differ	10
Lessons from practice-based examples.....	11
3. Survey results.....	11
Methods in brief.....	11
Key findings.....	12
Expanded findings	12
4. What external partners need.....	13
5. Contemplating Pathways Forward	15
Option 1: Improve visibility and coordination.....	15
Option 2: Building internal capacity for facilitation and dialogic practice.....	15
Option 3: Establishing a professional Dialogue Centre with national reach.....	16
6. Discussion	16
Resource list.....	18

1. Background

Exploring Dialogue as a Working Method

In November 2024, SLU Future Food staff visited the Dialogue Centre at Wageningen University and Research (WUR). Housed in Omnia, a building opened to the public in 2022, the center reflects a significant investment in both physical and social infrastructure, aimed at positioning WUR as the go-to place for addressing complex issues. As described on WUR's website, the Dialogue Centre is "dedicated to facilitating meaningful dialogues about life sciences and the agrifood sector, offering a space for in-depth and open conversations with partners, stakeholders, and society."

The visit prompted a straightforward but far-reaching question on return to Sweden: what possibilities does Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU) have for dialogue? More specifically, what would a deeper, more structured, and more intentional approach to dialogue look like within SLU, given its disciplinary breadth and its mandate to engage with complex societal challenges?

This question did not emerge in isolation. For several years, the Futures Platforms at SLU have been reflecting on how best to use their resources to strengthen cross-disciplinary capacity at the university. In parallel, a number of SLU initiatives have been researching, teaching, and practicing dialogue in different forms. One such example is TABLE, a global food systems collaboration involving SLU, Wageningen University, and other partner universities, which since 2020 has been exploring and applying dialogic methods across research, communication, and engagement activities.

Against this backdrop, SLU Future Food initiated an exploration of dialogue as a working method for its own activities, with the potential to collaborate with other Futures Platforms and existing groups at SLU. Matthew Kessler, working with SLU Future Food and TABLE, was appointed as coordinator for this work. His objective was to listen, map, and learn across the university in support of future planning.

Between September and December 2025, the work combined several methods. These included semi-structured conversations with SLU staff and students; a workshop with dialogue practitioners at SLU; a half-day workshop with non-academic partners working with the university; a university-wide survey with more than 100 responses; and a review of relevant dialogue literature. Together, these activities provided both a snapshot of current practices and a richer understanding of how dialogue is understood, used, and experienced across contexts relevant to SLU Future Food's work.

Rather than prescribing a single model or endpoint, this report aims to support reflection, internal discussion within SLU, and informed choice. Specifically, the report:

- maps existing dialogue-related initiatives and practices across SLU,
- identifies key factors that shape how dialogue unfolds in practice, both enabling and constraining, and
- outlines several possible pathways that dialogue could be integrated across the Futures platforms, both in the near- and long-term future;

Throughout the report, a single, fixed definition of “dialogue” is intentionally avoided. This approach allows a wide range of organizations and initiatives working with distinct but related methods to be included in the exploration.

For SLU Future Food, a broad spectrum of practices are discussed, ranging from active listening in daily conversations to more deliberate approaches embedded in how projects, events and meetings are designed, facilitated, and evaluated. The purpose of this report is to clarify what different approaches make possible and to use that understanding as a basis for considering next steps. A working definition is therefore introduced in the following section.

Why Universities Want Dialogue, and Why They Struggle With It

Universities are increasingly expected to engage with complex societal challenges that cut across disciplines, values, and forms of expertise. Questions relating to food systems, land use, climate change, animal health, and environmental sustainability are not only technically complex; they are also contested, value-laden, and politically charged. Addressing such issues requires ways of working that can hold uncertainty, surface disagreement, and integrate multiple forms of knowledge.

In this report, dialogue serves as one such tool. In its simplest sense, dialogue refers to structured and facilitated forms of conversation oriented toward mutual understanding rather than persuasion or decision-making. Unlike debate, dialogue does not aim to win arguments or produce agreement. Instead, it seeks to explore differences and potential common ground, clarify assumptions and build a shared understanding of complex problems.

At the same time, dialogue sits uneasily within the contemporary university. This tension emerged repeatedly in interviews and survey responses conducted for this report.

Respondents described academic work being shaped by performance pressures, time scarcity, and incentive structures that prioritize expertise, efficiency, and tangible outputs. Dialogic work, by contrast, often unfolds more slowly and relies on practices – such as deep listening, openness to uncertainty, and engagement with disagreement – that are difficult to standardize, measure, or reward.

As a result, dialogue is frequently valued in principle but marginal in practice. It tends to appear informally and episodically: within interdisciplinary collaboration, supervision, teaching, or engagement with external partners, rather than as a deliberately designed method. When dialogue is not recognized as a form of work in its own right, it remains vulnerable to being crowded out by competing demands.

Addressing complex societal challenges requires more than dialogue alone. It also depends on the integration of diverse forms of expertise and the involvement of stakeholders who shape and implement decisions. This raises a broader question for universities: what is their appropriate role in contributing to such processes, and how might dialogic approaches support that role in ways that are both realistic and meaningful?

For platforms such as SLU Future Food, which operate at the interface between research, communication, and engagement, these tensions raise a set of open questions.

- What aims should dialogue serve, and which stakeholders should it meaningfully engage?
- How can dialogic practices be supported in ways that add value rather than burden?
- forms of dialogue best align with SLU Future Food's role, resources, and mandate?
- How might they help navigate differing expectations of (non-)academic stakeholders?

The sections that follow move from this framing to a closer examination of how dialogic practices already appear within SLU, and what they may reasonably support in the context of SLU Future Food's work.

2. Examples of Dialogue Activities at SLU

SLU is not starting from scratch. Beneath its formal structures, an entire ecosystem of dialogic practice is already taking shape. In some cases, dialogue is an explicit part of research design or pedagogical approach. There are divisions at SLU that research dialogic practices). In others, it emerges more informally, driven by people who encounter the limits of siloed expertise and look for ways to work differently.

Table 1 below captures a selection of dialogue and dialogue-adjacent initiatives currently active across research, education, and engagement at SLU. The list is not exhaustive, but it illustrates the breadth of activity already underway.

Table 1.

INITIATIVE / PROGRAM	FOCUS	EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT?	NEXT STEPS
Mistra Environmental Communication	Research + Practice + Training	Yes	Funding to 2028
Interdisciplinary Academy	Research + Education	Some	5th round starts 1 Sep 2026
Samverkare	Public engagement	Yes	Ongoing
TABLE	Practice + Education	Yes	Funding to 2026
Climate Conversations	Practice	Some	?
Society for Transformative Conversations	Research + Practice + Education	Yes	Funding to 2026
Studium Generale	Education + Public engagement	Some	Funding to 2026

These initiatives vary in their primary orientation. Some practice dialogue directly, bringing together actors with different forms of knowledge or conflicting perspectives. Others study dialogue as part of research on governance, communication, or transformation. Still others teach dialogic skills as a competency for students or professionals. Each of these orientations contributes something distinct. At the same time, they do not always overlap or connect in ways that allow shared learning or a common language of dialogue to develop across the university.

A small number of initiatives closely align with Olivier Escobar’s (2011, p. 27) definition of dialogue as collaborative inquiry, where “dialogue does not seek completion; instead, it seeks the mapping and understanding of issues, ideas and feelings.” Others would not describe themselves as “dialogue initiatives” at all. Yet they still engage deeply with real-world complexity: translating research for diverse publics, creating space for reflection across disciplines, or bringing differing – and sometimes conflicting – perspectives into constructive contact. What unites these efforts and initiatives highlighted in this report is a shared commitment to curiosity, critical self-reflection, and working seriously with difference. However, that doesn’t mean they are ‘doing dialogue.’

It is also notable how most of these efforts came into being. While some were supported through strategic programs or external funding, many developed organically. They were shaped less by mandate than by necessity, creativity, and the practical demands of collaboration. This bottom-up character is itself informative. It suggests that the impulse toward dialogue at SLU is not imposed, but emergent. It also echoes findings from Jasmine Zhang and James Kurén

Weldon's (2024) pilot study on interdisciplinary research conditions at SLU, which found that nearly half of researchers engaged in interdisciplinary work would like to do more.

Seen in this light, the current landscape does not point to an absence of dialogue, but to a strong foundation of experimentation. Energy, expertise, and willingness already exist across the university. The opportunity now is to build on this foundation: to make these practices more visible, to enable learning across initiatives, and to explore how dialogue might be supported more deliberately where it adds value.

Dialogue in action

TABLE

TABLE is a platform for knowledge and dialogue on the future of food. Its work focuses on exploring visions, values, and evidence in food systems debates, with the explicit aim of reducing polarization.

As described in its strategic outlook, TABLE creates inclusive spaces for constructive dialogue by bringing together diverse stakeholders – policymakers, civil society, industry, funders, and academia – often across positions that rarely meet. Its facilitative approaches prioritize deep listening, mutual understanding, and reflection, while actively seeking out perspectives that are marginalized or under-represented.

Dialogue practices at TABLE takes multiple forms: long-form podcasts, letterbox exchanges between contrasting viewpoints, facilitated workshops, and public events. Across these formats, the emphasis is on understanding where different positions come from, rather than forcing consensus. At TABLE, dialogic tools are used as a way to surface assumptions, clarify trade-offs, and open space for more nuanced decision-making in contested food systems debates.

Some key examples:

- Podcast episode: [Narrowing the yield gap in Sub-Saharan Africa](#)
- Podcast series (co-produced with SLU Future Food): [Meat: the four futures](#)
- Report: [Alternative proteins and better food futures: Moving beyond binaries](#)
- Report based on a 2-day workshop: [Tomorrow on the table: The politics and economics of food system transformation](#)

Society for Transformative Conversations (STC)

The Society for Transformative Conversations (STC) is a loose, international network of researchers, facilitators, practitioners, and public actors experimenting with conversation as a transformative social practice. Founded by Keri Facer (U

Bristol), Åsa Berggren (SLU), Pernilla Glaser (beginning in 2026 at SLU with Studium Generale), and Jasmine Zhang (SLU), the Society brings together people working across academia, civil society, government, and the arts who share a curiosity about how conversation itself shapes knowledge, relationships, and democratic possibility.

STC approaches conversation not primarily as a technique for reaching agreement, but as a relational and imaginative practice. Its work is grounded in the idea that complex societal challenges – such as food futures, land use, and ecological breakdown – require forms of conversation that can hold uncertainty, emotion, and difference without rushing toward resolution. Drawing on traditions from futures studies, participatory research, and creative facilitation, STC experiments with dialogic formats that are speculative, embodied, and often deliberately unfamiliar.

Examples of STC's dialogic practice include:

- **Speculative futures workshops** (e.g. *Uppsala in Space*), using science fiction to surface assumptions, explore food system resilience, and identify new questions for collaboration.
- **Place-based and embodied dialogues** that use nature, ritual, and silence to deepen reflection.
- **Dialogic salons** (e.g. *Land Futures Salon*) designed to slow discussion, build psychological safety, and deepen cross-sector reflection
- **Train-the-trainer programs** developing a community of practice of participants to facilitate dialogue.

Mistra Environmental Communication (Mistra EC)

Mistra EC is a long-running interdisciplinary research program, funded by Mistra, that explores how communication, including dialogue, shapes environmental governance and decision-making. Its work sits at the intersection of environmental politics, deliberative democracy, and practice-based engagement, with a strong emphasis on how conflicts, power relations, and learning processes unfold in real-world sustainability challenges.

Within Mistra EC, dialogue is understood as a form of communication characterized by mutual reason-giving, attentive listening, and openness to learning from others. Drawing on traditions from deliberative democratic theory (e.g. Habermas, Dryzek) and empirical governance research, the program treats dialogue not as neutral exchange, but as a situated practice shaped by institutions, expertise, and unequal power.

A distinctive contribution of Mistra EC is its development of practical tools – such as the Reflection Cycle, Dialogue Mapper, Dialogue Navigator, and Inquiry-Based Approach – that help practitioners and researchers analyze, design, and reflect on dialogue in complex governance contexts.

Examples of Mistra EC's dialogic work include:

- **Research projects** examining how dialogue functions in collaborative environmental governance and conflict-laden planning processes.
- **University teaching** that equips students with conceptual and practical tools for dialogic engagement.
- **In-service training and workshops** supporting practitioners working with participation, conflict, and stakeholder engagement.
- **Development of analytic and facilitative tools** to make dialogue more transparent, reflexive, and accountable.

What these initiatives share – and where they differ

Viewed together, these initiatives reveal a diverse but recognizable pattern in how “dialogue” is currently being practiced at SLU. Despite differences in scale, mandate, and institutional location, several shared features stand out.

Across these examples, dialogue is being used to work with complexity rather than to resolve it quickly. Each initiative creates space – explicitly or implicitly – for uncertainty, multiple perspectives, and reflection across disciplinary or societal boundaries. Trust-building, curiosity, and attentiveness to how conversations are held are treated as integral to the work, not as optional extras. In most cases, dialogue is also closely tied to real-world questions, whether through engagement with external stakeholders, contested sustainability issues, or internal academic collaboration.

At the same time, important differences shape what these initiatives can do and how far their influence reaches. Some focus on internal dialogue within the university, while others are explicitly outward-facing, engaging policymakers, civil society, or the public. Levels of institutional support and stability vary significantly, as does the degree to which disagreement is foregrounded or carefully contained.

Furthermore, each of them approaches non-academic stakeholders differently. The value they create for these stakeholders also ranges, a topic which we'll explore in a section below. In some cases, dialogue is expected to lead toward tangible outputs or decisions; in others, its value lies in sense-making, relationship-building, concrete actions, or opening new questions.

These variations do not signal inconsistency or weakness. Rather, they reflect a plural dialogue ecosystem – one in which different forms of dialogic practice serve different purposes. At present, however, these differences are rarely articulated or connected across initiatives, making it difficult to learn systematically from one another or to see how they might complement rather than duplicate or compete.

Lessons from practice-based examples

Taken together, these initiatives point to two encouraging realities:

- SLU already has many of the ingredients of a dialogue-rich culture.
- With greater coordination and support, there is clear potential for deeper connection, shared learning, and longer-term continuity.

From the perspective of SLU Future Food and other engaged platforms, the question isn't whether there is interest, but how dialogic practices can be supported at scale and sustained over time. In what way can the Futures Platforms and university continue to meaningfully support the motivation and interest in employing more dialogic tools.

The next section turns to the perspectives of staff and students across the university, drawing on survey responses to explore what currently makes dialogue easier or harder in everyday work, and what kinds of support might strengthen it going forward.

3. Survey results

Below is an executive summary of *What Helps and Hinders Dialogue at SLU*. A more thorough analysis is in a separate document.

From 25 November to 2 December 2025, SLU Future Food invited staff across the university to reflect on three open questions, without defining dialogue for respondents:

1. Where does positive dialogue already happen?
2. What gets in the way of dialogue?
3. What supports are needed to make dialogue easier and more productive?

Across 100 responses, a clear picture emerges. Staff at SLU value dialogue and see it as important for research, teaching, collaboration, and workplace culture. At the same time, many experience dialogue as fragile – dependent on time, trust, and informal effort rather than being reliably supported by the structures of everyday academic work.

Methods in brief

The survey received 113 responses, of which 14 were incomplete. Open-text responses were analysed inductively and grouped into thematic categories based on recurring concepts. Inclusive multi-coding was used, meaning each response could be assigned to multiple categories where relevant. Categories were refined iteratively to ensure clarity and consistency. Frequencies are reported as the number and percentage of respondents mentioning each category at least once. This

approach captures the overlap and complexity in how dialogue is experienced across roles and contexts.

Key findings

Viewed together, responses to all three survey questions point to a consistent pattern. Whether staff describe moments when dialogue worked well, barriers they encounter, or supports they need, they return to the same underlying conditions. Dialogue flourishes when people have time, trust, proximity, and supportive structures; it falters when these conditions are absent.

Five themes recur across the survey:

- **Time and workload pressures.** Dialogue requires space to slow down and think together; it disappears when every minute is accounted for.
- **Workplace culture and relationships.** Trust, respect, and constructive tone enable participation, while fear of judgement and unresolved conflict inhibit it.
- **Leadership signals and support structures.** Dialogue thrives when encouraged and facilitated, and stalls when meetings are rushed or purely informational.
- **Visibility and connection across the university.** Knowing who does what – and who to talk to – encourages exchange; silos suppress it.
- **Physical and social proximity.** Dialogue often emerges through informal, in-person encounters, which decline with fragmented work patterns and remote work.

Expanded findings

Where dialogue already works

Positive dialogue at SLU most often occurs outside formal structures. Nearly half of respondents pointed to informal encounters – fika, corridor conversations, spontaneous exchanges across roles and disciplines – as moments that helped them rethink their work. Structured scholarly spaces such as seminars, journal clubs, and PhD defences were also important when they prioritized discussion over rushed critique.

Dialogue was described as especially productive when people worked together on shared tasks, such as developing projects or co-designing teaching, and when feedback took place in trusted relationships like supervision or mentorship. Engagement with external actors – stakeholders, students, and the public – was also seen as a source of renewed purpose. Across these settings, what mattered most was not hierarchy, but trust, curiosity, and time.

It is worth noting that many of these examples would not be classified as formal dialogue in a methodological sense. Rather, they point to the importance of meaningful, trust-based conversation as the foundation on which more structured dialogic approaches can build.

What gets in the way

The most frequently cited barrier was lack of time. Over half of respondents described productivity pressures – overloaded calendars, administrative burden, and competing demands – as squeezing out reflection and dialogue, which is often treated as optional rather than core work.

Cultural and relational barriers were nearly as prominent. Respondents described environments where critique felt personal, people hesitated to speak openly, or conflicts went unresolved. Power dynamics, particularly for early-career researchers, further shaped who felt able to contribute.

What supports are needed

Across responses, support for dialogue was not framed as a call for new competencies or motivation. Instead, staff repeatedly described a mismatch between what they know enables good dialogue and what the university currently makes possible. Dialogue already happens where time, trust, and proximity exist; it falters where these are squeezed out. In this sense, dialogue is not a methodological gap at SLU, but an organizational one. The issue is not how to teach people to converse, but whether the system recognizes dialogue as legitimate work rather than something done on the margins.

Taken together, the findings suggest that strengthening dialogue is less about adding new initiatives than about reweighting existing priorities. While this report has focused on internal conditions within the university, effective dialogue also depends on how SLU is perceived and experienced by those beyond it. Understanding the expectations, needs, and constraints of external partners is therefore essential, bringing us to the next section.

4. What external partners need

In October 2025, SLU Future Food convened its reference group made up of external collaborators representing different parts of society, including industry, policy, and civil society. These actors are not only stakeholders in future dialogue processes, but valued partners. Their reflections therefore offer an important external perspective on how SLU engages in dialogue, what builds trust, and what risks undermining it.

A central message from the group was the need to take dialogue seriously as a professional practice. Dialogue that is poorly designed, under-resourced, or insufficiently followed through, risks undermining trust and credibility. This is particularly relevant among actors who may already be cautious about engagement.

Trust, once lost, is difficult to rebuild. From this perspective, dialogue is not a low-cost or symbolic activity, but one that requires competence, clarity, and accountability.

Several practical considerations were highlighted. Participants stressed the importance of clearly articulating the value of participation from the outset, recognizing that time and attention are scarce resources. Choices around location, timing, and duration matter. It is preferable, though not always possible, to host dialogues in environments and places that reflect the issue at hand, rather than defaulting to conference rooms. Again, where possible, it is preferable to allow sufficient time for meaningful exchange. Short, performative formats were seen as ineffective. Equally important is clarity of purpose - participants should share an understanding of the aim of the dialogue, the type of conversation being sought (dialogue rather than debate), and the kinds of questions being explored.

The reference group also emphasized the importance of selecting whom to invite. Dialogue benefits from bringing together actors with genuine connections to the issue, including competitors and actors who may not usually engage with one another. At the same time, the group cautioned that power imbalances, between interest groups, or between scientific evidence and political or economic influence, must be acknowledged and actively managed. Creating a safe space was seen as essential (e.g. Chatham House rules), which includes trust-building measures such as limited attribution, restrained note-taking, and an explicit commitment to good faith and shared problem-solving.

When asked to share specific positive experiences with dialogue, and what made them successful, the group named pointed to the role of the moderator. Effective moderators must be well-prepared, perceived as independent, and willing to act as constructive provocateurs. Mapping underlying conflicts, rather than avoiding them, was identified as a prerequisite for productive dialogue. As discussed earlier, the moderator is pivotal in ensuring that everyone in the room understands what the shared overall goal is, as well as entering the space with an openness to engage with divergent pathways.

Finally, the reference group reflected on SLU's potential role. They saw clear value in SLU acting as a trusted convener with societal relevance, capable of supporting difficult conversations that others struggle to host. However, this role requires clarity of purpose, investment in facilitation competence, and a long-term commitment to learning and improvement. Dialogue, they stressed, works best when it is concrete, well-moderated, in-person, and oriented toward visible outcomes, while remaining transparent about the fact that it is a learning journey rather than a finished model.

5. Contemplating Pathways Forward

SLU Future Food and SLU more broadly have multiple possible pathways for strengthening dialogue capacity. Depending on the ambition, scope and goals, each would require a different budget, supports and levels of coordination. The aim here is to sketch the landscape of possibilities, not to advocate for any particular path. Three options are presented below, each with a discussion on their potential rewards and risks.

Option 1: Improve visibility and coordination.

Goal: Improve visibility and coherence with dialogue without creating new structures.

Actions:

- Host a webpage that maps contacts, initiatives, tools, and resources.
- Hire part-time position (20-40%) with budget to coordinate activities and trainings. Tasks include:
 - Connect various dialogue initiatives to each other
 - Communicate their findings and platforming their open events

Option 2: Building internal capacity for facilitation and dialogic practice

Goal: With low to moderate investment, SLU can cultivate a trained cohort of facilitators and integrate dialogic practice into research, teaching, and collaboration.

Actions, which are in addition to the previous tier:

- Hire one full-time position with budget to facilitate the following:
 - Offer bi-monthly “train the trainings” to staff and students; create a wide facilitation group.
 - Develop materials, workshops, and internal consultancy support.
 - Strengthen interdisciplinary competencies.

Risks:

- Requires continued support and evaluation.
- There’s no guarantee of integration into larger research projects.

Option 3: Establishing a professional Dialogue Centre with national reach

Goal: With sustained institutional commitment, SLU could become Sweden's go-to dialogue hub on issues relating to food, land, environment, forests, aquatic systems, and agriculture.

Actions:

- Dedicated staff, programmatic funding, and spaces.
- Offer support for both internal and external stakeholders.
- Provide research-informed methodologies and evaluation tools.
- Position SLU as a national leader in dialogic practice.

Risks:

- Requires long-term investment, alignment with strategic priorities, and careful governance.
- If trust is severed between external actors and university, then the center cannot achieve its mission.

As discussed throughout the report, strengthening a university culture that values dialogue is both important and challenging. Options 2 and 3 each seek to contribute to cultural change in different ways. Involving facilitation experts from a range of disciplines to lead “train-the-trainer” sessions, alongside building a broader pool of trainers, represents a bottom-up approach to culture change. Option 3, by contrast, illustrates how a more strategic, top-down commitment could leverage institutional resources to support these goals in a more coordinated and sustained way.

6. Discussion

This report points to a clear and growing interest in dialogue across SLU. Dialogue and dialogue-adjacent practices are already embedded in research, teaching, external engagement, and institutional initiatives – appearing in formal programs and informal spaces, in classrooms and workshops, and in collaborations beyond the university. SLU is therefore neither new to dialogue nor attempting to import it as a novel solution. Rather, the university is in a phase of maturation: experimenting, learning, and building experience across contexts.

As dialogic practices become more widespread, and unevenly defined, it is a timely moment to pause and reflect on how deliberately they are being supported, resourced, and developed. This creates an opportunity for the Futures Platforms to consider what, and how, to support what comes next.

Discussion point 1: Is “dialogue” the right concept – and the right fit – for the university?

Across interviews and materials, people use dialogue to describe quite different aims: problem-solving and decision-making; sense-making and navigating complexity; or collaboration oriented toward delivery and impact. Dialogue can support each of these, but it is not interchangeable with them. This raises a productive question: should SLU embrace “dialogue” as an umbrella term, as Wageningen University has done, or would complementary concepts offer clearer guidance for research, practice, and pedagogy?

Discussion point 2: How do we understand and assess value?

Dialogue creates different forms of value for different actors. For some initiatives, value may lie in better decisions or policy relevance; for others, in learning, relationship-building, or institutional reflection. These differences are not problems to be solved, but realities to be acknowledged. However, without some shared reflection on what value means in different contexts, it becomes difficult to decide what deserves long-term support or how success should be understood.

Note on interpretation

This report does not offer definitive answers to these questions. It should be read as a working document – one that surfaces patterns, tensions, and possibilities to inform collective reflection.

A few concluding points:

- **Making clear ‘why we are here’.** Clarity of purpose is a strong starting point. Whether supporting internal collaboration or engaging external stakeholders, conversations benefit from being explicit about why they are happening and what value they are expected to create.
- **Dialogue requires resourcing.** Dialogue is not a low-cost or symbolic activity. When used, it requires appropriate design, facilitation, resourcing, and follow-through to build trust and credibility.
- **Moving forward will require deliberate choices** about where dialogic approaches are most appropriate and how they align with SLU’s role, resources, and long-term ambitions.

Many thanks in advance for your careful reading, and for bringing your thoughtful, critical, and curious selves to the conversations that follow.

Resource list

- [A pilot study on institutional conditions for interdisciplinary research at SLU](#) (Jasmine Zhang and James Kurén Weldon, 2024)
- [Public Dialogue and Deliberation: A communication perspective for public engagement practitioners](#) (Oliver Escobar, 2011)
- [Wageningen Hands-on Dialogue Navigator](#) (Nina de Roo et al., 2021)
- [Beyond voice: Listening and silence in climate change education](#) (Keri Facer, 2024)