



Workshop 20

The role of higher education and research in ESD

Time: 2 April 2009: 9.00-13.00h

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Introduction

Higher education and research have much to contribute to the global effort for education for sustainable development (ESD). The vast majority of today's leaders attended institutions of higher education (IHEs) and the leaders of tomorrow will also. IHEs educate or "train" many of the professionals in our societies. Because these professionals work in or manage people who work in every economic sector both private and public, it is important that higher education incorporate sustainability into all of its programs.

IHEs are traditionally thought of as being active in three realms: teaching, research, and outreach/community service. The balance of these three depends on the institution. Some institutions are primarily teaching institutions while other also incorporate large portions of research. Some specialize in bridging theory with practice, giving students the opportunity to apply their learning in the surrounding communities. Regardless of the emphasis within the three, the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) calls IHEs to envision and incorporate sustainability into the programs, practices, and policies of each institution.

Challenges to IHEs and research institutions related to ESD include providing professional development opportunities for administrators and staff so they can become aware of and have respect for the value of incorporating sustainability into the activities of the IHE. Faculty members also need professional development to describe their course content, research, and service in terms of sustainability. The next challenge is to incorporate and implement sustainability

in all institutional activities. It is not enough to weave sustainability into current coursework or create additional courses related to sustainability. IHEs must also incorporate sustainability into all of their activities, buildings, policies, etc. so that the institution models sustainability in addition to teaching sustainability.

Access to and Retention in Quality Higher Education

The first thrust of ESD for the UNDESD is access and retention in quality basic education. Although higher education is not technically basic education, higher education is foundational to the creation of sustainable societies. The issue of access to higher education is pervasive around the world. Can students, who merit entrance on an academic basis, gain equal access to higher education regardless of social class and ethnicity? Unfortunately, economic, social, and geographic barriers prevent enrollment. The same barriers also lower student retention in IHEs. Without additional support underprivileged students too often do not complete their degree programs. Sustainability is so important to all geographic regions, social classes, and ethnic groups within our respective nations that we need to strive to assure equity in access to and retention in higher education. Only through such equity can the next generation of leadership understand and implement sustainability across our nations.

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The first thrust of ESD emphasizes quality. Defining quality education for primary, secondary, or higher education is difficult. In the new millennium, however, one key characteristic of quality in higher education is sustainability is part of the curriculum.

Reorienting Higher Education to Address Sustainability

Reorienting existing education to address sustainability is another of the four thrusts of the UNDES. What does it mean to reorient education to address sustainability? It means incorporating more knowledge, skills, issues, values, and perspectives related to sustainability into existing coursework and programs. Several disciplines and professions have taken the lead in defining what should be taught within their fields to address sustainability. For example, engineers in Australia and teacher educators around the globe have created recommendations for reorienting education provided through IHEs.

IHEs around the world are challenged to answer “what to teach” related to sustainability. It is easy to generate a long list of environmental, social, and economic concepts, paradigms, facts, issues, ideologies, theories, conceptual frameworks, etc. related to sustainability. Such a list rapidly grows cumbersome—too long to teach. IHEs and other organizations are attempting to identify “core competencies” or understandings that every student should have when they graduate. However, the list of such competencies is also long given the complexity of sustainability. In addition, given that all ESD must be locally relevant and culturally appropriate a list must be created to address the environmental, social and economic contexts of each IHE.

Another effort to define what students should know, do and value when they graduate is to identify learning outcomes. Many IHEs seek to find answers to core questions about what really matters in college or university. Portland State University has worked for 18 months on identifying campus-wide learning outcomes, which will be implemented by the various academic departments on campus to reflect disciplinary differences. PSU learning outcomes include: creative and critical thinking, communication, diver-

sity, ethics and social responsibility, internationalization, engagement, and sustainability. All of these contribute to ESD.

Addressing Sustainability beyond the Classroom

IHEs also have unique opportunities to model sustainability throughout their campuses by changing practices and policies. Some large IHEs are like miniature cities providing housing, food services, employment, transportation, utilities, entertainment, shopping, etc. to the thousands of people who visit campus each day. IHEs can demonstrate sustainability through purchasing practices, green construction and renovation, water and energy conservation, equitable hiring practices by gender and ethnicity, payment of a livable wage, etc. In this way the human-built environment and the human and economic interactions all reflect sustainability. IHEs can be leaders in communities where perhaps few other sustainable practices are evident. In this way students become accustomed to seeing sustainability and will carry those expectations with them to their future places of employment.

Research to Support ESD

Research Institutions and IHEs can do much to support ESD for the remainder of the DESD. The UNESCO Roadmap for Creating a Research Foundation to Support the UNDES identifies research as a means to advance progress in ESD. A need exists for:

- Analysis of policy (e.g., which educational policies promote or thwart ESD).
- Analysis of curriculum (e.g., identify current threads of sustainability in the curriculum and make recommendations for filling the gaps).
- Evaluation of practices (e.g., identify good practices and develop case studies).



A need also exists for other avenues of research including:

- Measurement of increasing competencies related to sustainability.
- Documenting the extent of changes in IHEs related to ESD.

Many IHEs carry out research that if guided appropriately could greatly enhance ESD in IHEs and other educational settings.

Objectives of the Workshop

1. To learn the current status of ESD in IHEs around the world.
2. To analyze current activities in IHEs related to ESD and distill lessons learned.
3. To create a vision for IHEs related to ESD
4. To identify next steps to help create the vision in the remainder of the UNDES D.

Questions to Guide the Discussion

1. What are the current successes and challenges for IHEs to weave sustainability into the course work (e.g., assessing learning outcomes and defining core competencies), research, and outreach as well as using sustainability to guide institutional practices (e.g., gender and ethnic equity in hiring) and policies (e.g., retrofitting buildings for energy conservation).
2. What are the lessons learned from the activities related to ESD, which we have heard about so far in this session?
3. What support (e.g., financial and other resources, a supportive legislative framework, enlightened policy at ministry level, opportunities for professional development) is needed beyond institutions of higher education to support efforts within IHEs to integrate sustainability into the curriculum, programs, practices, and policies of campuses?

4. Let's create a vision of an ideal IHE in terms of ESD.
5. What are the next steps for making progress toward this vision for IHEs during the second half of the UNDES D?

References

UNESCO (2005) *United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development: Draft International Implementation Scheme 2005-2015*, Paris: UNESCO.

UNESCO. (2007). *Roadmap for Creating a Research Foundation to Support the UNDES D*. Paris: UNESCO.

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