

## Workshop 20: The Role of Higher Education and Research in ESD

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This workshop was divided into a number of sessions which were all characterised by a series of brief, pre-arranged, and diverse inputs from attendees representing institutions from across the world; and questions and points from the floor.

### Conference Objective 1: To Highlight the Essential Contribution of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) to All of Education and to Achieving Quality Education

#### Why is ESD relevant?

Higher education is important to sustainable development for three main reasons. One is the immediate interface with employers where students go into work where the sustainability issues faced by society are met on a daily basis. There are examples of this connection across the entire higher education disciplinary spectrum. It is sometimes said that, although the higher education sector might have a relatively small proportion of society's ecological footprint, it has 100% of the students, and the opportunities and responsibilities that follow from this need to be taken seriously. Although the idea that students need to be engaged in these matters through teaching programmes and additional campus-based activities seems relatively clear; much less clear is how this might usefully be done, and for what reasons. These latter points remain, correctly, contentious.

The second reason is the unique research remit of higher education institutions. This hardly needs stressing in one sense, as university research and scholarly activity will continue to be key components of social progress – however we come to see this. Of course, opportunities for sustainability-related research are growing as both research funders, business and third sector organisations see the need for appropriate research. It is worth noting, however, that although the scope of research stretches across higher education institutions' disciplinary base, the opportunities for inter-disciplinary research – and its reporting – remain largely unrealised owing to a range of factors, some

of them institutional, some disciplinary, and others external.

The third reason is based on the premise that higher education institutions have direct links with business and the community where research could be disseminated, connections made, and social change brought about – all of which will be crucial to help society transform itself.

What a university does can be classified, one way or another, as teaching, research, or administration. A particular tension exists across all three of these domains which we might think of as a tension between stability and change, and between certainty and speculation. It is fuelled, on the one hand, by the imperative to archive, protect, apply and bequeath existing knowledge; and, on the other, the need to challenge that knowledge, to break through into unexplored territory, to go beyond problem-solving into comprehensive problem-redefinition. In the present, there is an expectation that everyone will face new, unimaginable circumstances in their lifetimes with which, in one way or another, and for better or for worse, they will have to learn to deal with. This means that the tension between the known and the unknown is now just as strong for university teaching – as it is in research. Whilst particular people, at particular times and places, may want the stress to be on knowledge transmission, or on a challenge to that knowledge, inescapably now both are crucial. This tension is also characteristic of societies that have universities. In fact, it is to universities that societies delegate a large part of the responsibility for informing their management of the problem of, as Jared M. Diamond puts it in *Collapse*,<sup>13</sup> 'choosing to fail or survive'. As his historical analysis well illustrates, this choice involves, crucially, knowing at any time which knowledge to revere and which to abandon – but the significance of such a choice has been known for a long time – certainly for long before anyone began a discussion about sustainable development.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Diamond, Jared M. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York: Penguin, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> To aid its analysis, this aspect of the report has drawn on Gough, Stephen and Scott, William. *Higher Education and Sustainable development: paradox and possibility*. London: Routledge, 2007.





### **Conference Objective 2: To Promote International Exchange on ESD** **What can we learn from each other?**

It is clear that it is not adequate just to focus on what change has been enabled as universities grapple with issues around sustainability; of equal importance has to be a focus on *how* change has been effected and what have been the positive (for example, successful incentives and awards, and tangible achievements) and the negative features (for example, financial and opportunity costs) of this. Thus, participants underlined that context and organisational structure and politics are all important when describing and reporting such change events. This requires a particular kind of case study approach – one that takes the process of change seriously. Such case studies, and other research stories, need to be written in ways to enable others – who may be in organisationally and culturally quite different situations – to see the relevance of the *what* and the *how* to their own context. There also needs to be a critical focus on methodology, as how we come to know what is being claimed is a crucial aspect of any claim to validity.

### **Conference Objective 3: To Carry out a Stock-taking of DESD Implementation** **What have we achieved so far, what are the lessons learnt?**

Participants from across the regions presented broadly positive and thoughtful views on what was being done and achieved, and on how constraints and barriers were being addressed. The unique positioning of universities in having, essentially, all the world's undergraduate students studying within them prior to taking up a career where sustainability issues are increasingly likely to be at the fore, means that the

incorporation of sustainability issues into undergraduate programmes is a key opportunity for institutions. It seems clear that a number of distinct models of effecting this are being developed, not least of which are the ways in which students are encouraged and enabled to work with organisations of all kinds (charities, public sector entities, partnerships, private corporations, etc.) in order to get actual problem-solving experience as a key (or complementary) aspect of their studies. Literature exists on the way that universities are participating in what amounts to nothing less than a reconceptualisation of the professional role.

### **Conference Objective 4: To Develop Strategies for the Way Ahead** **Where do we want to go from here?**

The need for greater interdisciplinary research was widely stressed as was the need for national and sub-regional policy-level incentives to stimulate it. Equally important was the need to try to ensure that research and/or development are reported in sector-significant outlets, in explicit leading, as well as niche journals. Many attendees saw UNU's Regional Centres of Expertise (RCE) and RCE international networking as important ways of aiding the collaboration of universities, and their reaching out to communities through a common agenda. One point that was stressed strongly was the diverse nature of universities across the globe and even within regions or countries. Universities can have widely differing approaches to, roles, foci and structures and, because of these and other factors, may well have different sustainability issues. It was thought that this means that each institution needs to follow a development path in relation to sustainability that makes contextual and contingent sense to it. Further, it was concluded that the world's universities can be thought of as being at different stages in their dealing with sustainability issues: from some quite experienced, sophisticated and advanced, to others who have scarcely begun even to think about how to begin. Whilst all such development is both contextual and contingent, it may be possible to say something conceptually sensible and helpful about such stages, and about how institutions could be helped to become aware of their own developmental achievements and ongoing needs.

**Workshop rapporteur:** William Scott, University of Bath, Centre for Research in Education and the Environment, United Kingdom