UNIVERSITIES AND SUSTAINABILITY

Reorienting higher education towards sustainable development

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The concept 'universities and sustainability' can be defined and understood in various ways as informed by context and conceptions of sustainable development

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Some Conceptions of 'Universities and Sustainability'

- One understanding of SD is related very much to the relationship between the university and its community, and how knowledge in a university can strengthen innovation and sustainable living outcomes at the community level. This understanding is most often related to improving living conditions, quality of life, improving education, and better technologies to manage the issues that face communities.

- A global understanding of sustainability, more a concept that is centred on the technologies that are needed to try to transform society. Examples here would be the new solar voltaic panels, wind energy systems and so on. "We are hearing a lot about these kinds of technologies, particularly the notion of 'technology transfer' which is involving our universities in high tech sustainability solutions. Some of the universities, especially in my country, South Africa, are starting to look seriously at these as a science and technology development opportunity. They are also developing some of those kinds of technologies".

- Community innovation - relates to the first concept above, but has a stronger, more critical kind of scholarship embedded in it. This concept of sustainable development seeks to assess and try to understand the power relations associated with resource flows. So, who owns the resources? What does it mean if you have transnational capital extracting your resources? And what does that mean for the underlying wealth of the country? What are we loosing through such massive resource extraction practices? Such issues are not new to the African continent, as the project of imperialism was essentially a resource extraction project. This, more critical work on sustainable development seeks to uncover the power of resource flows, and who holds this power and how? She said that "We know that 80% of the resources are used by 20% of the world's people, so there's a very strong power relation there". This type of critical scholarship is emerging and people are trying to unpack that. Such scholarship, in her view, is crucial for African societies to make wise decisions about their resources and their resource base.

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THE EETU APPROACH TO OPERATIONALIZING THE CONCEPT: 'UNIVERSITIES AND SUSTAINABILITY'

UNEP's Environmental Education and Training Unit (EETU) seeks to operationalize the concept '*universities and sustainability*' with due consideration of the following:

- Greening of university curricula (integrating environment and sustainability concerns into university curricula across disciplines).
- Greening of university infrastructure, facilities and operations.
- Community engagement (by universities) for sustainability.
- University students' participation/engagement in sustainability programmes, projects, initiatives and activities for environment and sustainability.
- The role of university management/administration/leadership in sustainability within and beyond universities.

Greening of University Curricular

- Focusing on inspiring, mentoring, informing, facilitating and enabling universities to undertake *curriculum innovations* for sustainability.
- Guiding, inspiring, informing and facilitating the development of innovative masters level curricula on Green Economy and Ecosystems management.
- Developing and publishing higher education guidelines for reorienting curricula towards SD.
- Environment and sustainability seminars for university and the business and industry communities – it is hoped that these will inspire curriculum review and reorientation towards sustainable development in response to job-market demands for green skills.

University students' participation/engagement in programmes, projects, initiatives and activities for environment and sustainability

- Inspiration and support students conferences and seminars on sustainability – e.g. the 2011 World Students Forum on Environment for Sustainability held in Shanghai –China;
- Inspiring, encouraging and supporting the formation of the students' component of GUPES and MESA.
- Encouraging and supporting student participation in on and out-of-campus sustainability initiatives.

Greening of university infrastructure, facilities and operations

- 'Greening universities initiative'- inspiring, facilitating and supporting universities to green their infrastructure, facilities and operations.
- Developing and publishing a 'Greening Universities toolkit'.
- Developing and publishing a quick reference (how-to-do) guide to Greening universities.

Engaging university management/administration/leadership in sustainability within and beyond universities

- Recognizing and clarifying the roles and responsibilities of university leadership and management in GUPES, and in integrating environment and sustainability concerns into university systems, programmes and activities;
- Enhancing collaboration between and amongst UNEP and university leaders and managers from all six regions: Africa, Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and West Asia.
- Encouraging and supporting networking between and among university leaders and managers committed to sustainability e.g. Southern African Regional Universities Association – which in its commitment to climate change, adaptation and higher education held a two day dialogue event titled '*Climate Change, adaptation and Higher Education: Securing our future*' with Vice Chancellor from the SADC region from 21-22 October 2010 in

Community engagement

- Encouraging universities to engage with communities for sustainability through community-based action research and problem solving initiatives in the context of Environmental Education and Education for Sustainable development.
- Supporting interaction and partnerships between universities and the private sector through environment and sustainability seminars for business and industry and university communities. These are aimed at enhancing applied competence in sustainability terms as well as influence universities to respond to the private sector job-market demands for green skills through reorientation of university curricula.