The Role of Campus, Curriculum, and Community in Higher Education for Sustainable Development – a Conference Report

Georg Müller-Christ¹, Stephen Sterling², Rietje van Dam-Mieras³, Maik Adomßent⁴, Daniel Fischer⁴, Marco Rieckmann⁵.

1 Chair for Business Studies and Sustainable Management, University of Bremen, Germany
2 Centre for Sustainable Futures, Plymouth University, United Kingdom
3 Institute of Environmental Sciences, Leiden University, The Netherlands
4 Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany
5/* Institute for Environmental and Sustainability Communication, UNESCO Chair in Higher Education for Sustainable Development, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Scharnhorststr. 1, D-21335 Lüneburg, Germany, E-mail address: rieckmann@uni.leuphana.de

Published in the Journal of Cleaner Production

Available at:

http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0959652613001005

Citation:

Version:
Authors’ final postprint version

Online since:
6 March 2013
The Role of Campus, Curriculum, and Community in Higher Education for Sustainable Development – a Conference Report

Abstract: On the last day of the 4th UNESCO Chair Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD), in September 2011 at Leuphana University of Lüneburg (Germany), three roundtables were held on university contributions to sustainable development in the fields of "campus", "curriculum" and "community". Each roundtable (RT) was chaired by a leading expert in the field. The Campus RT highlighted, for instance, the role of communication, the importance of engaging all university members while also including senior administration officials, and the value of acting as an example of sustainability for neighbouring communities; the Curriculum RT discussed, among other aspects, the relevance of windows of opportunity, external pressure and internal drivers; whereas the Community RT highlighted the significance of universities as meeting places, the engagement of students with the real world and the expansion of quality criteria as well as quality assurance.

Keywords: Higher education for sustainable development; UNESCO Chair Conference; campus; curriculum; community

On the last day of the 4th UNESCO Chair Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development (HESD), in September 2011 at Leuphana University of Lüneburg (Germany), three roundtables were held on university contributions to sustainable development in the fields of "campus", "curriculum" and "community". Each roundtable (RT) was chaired by a leading expert in the field (see Table 1). The format of the RTs was short presentations by each invited discussant followed by questions and comments from other panel members, as well as from the broader group. This report provides an insight into the discussions and results of the three RTs and concludes with some overall key messages.

Table 1: Chairpersons, panel discussants and convenors of the three roundtables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roundtable</th>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chair</td>
<td>Stephen Sterling, Plymouth University, United Kingdom</td>
<td>Georg Müller-Christ, University of Bremen, Germany</td>
<td>Rietje van Dam-Mieras, Leiden University, The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panel Discussants</td>
<td>Pátricia Aguirre, Universidad Técnica del Norte, Ecuador</td>
<td>Matthias Barth, RMIT University, Australia</td>
<td>Lenelis Kruse-Graumann, University of Heidelberg, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jana Dlouha, Charles University Prague, Czech Republic</td>
<td>Rashidah Shuib, University of Sains Malaysia, Malaysia</td>
<td>Daniel Lang, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Søren Løkke, Aalborg University, Denmark</td>
<td>Ute Stoltenberg, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
<td>Jos Rikers, Open University, The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jenneth Parker, Schumacher Institute for Sustainable Systems, United Kingdom</td>
<td>Marco Rieckmann, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
<td>Arjen Wals, Wageningen University, The Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convenor</td>
<td>Maik Adomßent, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
<td>Marco Rieckmann, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
<td>Daniel Fischer, Leuphana University of Lüneburg, Germany</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Campus Roundtable

The overall question for the Campus Roundtable was: How can universities better use their campuses to increase the quality and effectiveness of sustainability education for their communities? Additionally, the discussion was guided by the following questions: What is the current ‘state of play’? What are the benefits, and costs, of increasing campus-learning links? What innovative methods are being tried and what innovative ideas could be tried in an effort to link campus life to sustainability education? Who are the stakeholders? Where are the opportunities and barriers?

The introductory talk addressed the deepening engagement of universities with the sustainability agenda. The ‘greening of campuses’ was often seen as a first stage, and many universities have taken steps to improve their environmental performance in terms of campus management. What is less common is a closer integration of the campus so that it becomes part of the HESD curriculum. In this scenario, there is an ‘informal’ curriculum, where the campus is a place for extracurricular work and events; a ‘formal’ curriculum, where the campus is used as a resource for learning; and a ‘hidden’ curriculum, where, for example, the way buildings and resources are managed and operated has effects on learning about sustainability. The hidden curriculum, it should be noted, can therefore be negative or positive. Bringing the campus to the fore in thinking about teaching and learning, not only for students but also for teaching staff, strengthens the possibility of achieving whole institutional change. The session was then taken forward by asking the panel members to discuss the overall topic and the lead questions.

Some key points coming out of the presentations and discussion were:

- **Underscore the key concept of well-being.** The idea of the ‘good-living campus’ is an ideal starting point for activities promoting sustainability, because both issues on and off the campus can be used to foster inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. For students, small practical examples that really work allow them to realise their own ideas. This philosophy of “hands-on practice” can serve to attract further students.

- **Engage all members of the university, especially senior administration.** The participation of all members of the university community is crucial. Students may be eager to challenge existing structures, but it is also necessary to involve leading administrators in order to ensure top-down support.

- **Make communication the key.** The necessity of open communication between stakeholders both on and off campus is essential to the success of HESD initiatives. To ‘walk your talk’ is even more important when a whole institutional approach is being followed, because only when actions are consistent with the messages being delivered communication will be perceived as credible.

- **Link university accountability with campus sustainability.** The greening of universities is part of their “third role” of taking responsibility for societal developments. Universities should feel obligated to foster the growth and dispersion of knowledge that will trigger and accelerate – rather than hinder – societal change towards sustainability.

- **Stimulate innovative potential.** The university campus is an important testing field for change – not only for new knowledge but also for possible futures. The campus can be a site showcasing innovative examples of sustainability, for example, in food production and consumption with students and staff members gardening and holding farmers’ markets. This concept includes considering the facilitative role that NGOs can play in helping initiate change projects in partnership with universities.

- **Think beyond the university’s physical boundaries to provide transferable models for the surrounding community.** Universities have to transcend their self-conception as ivory towers where theory takes precedence over practice, where the generation of knowledge is considered something separate from the elaboration of policy recommendations. In the sustainability paradigm, universities should opt for a more collaborative development of knowledge by initiating a society-wide dialogue with other key players that also reflects their visions and ethical considerations. Universities thus act as examples of sustainability for their neighbouring communities in society.
The Campus Roundtable closed by discussing developments at Plymouth University in the UK, where a multi-year project resulted in a much closer integration between the Estates, the university office for procurement and sustainability, and the Teaching and Learning Directorate. This collaboration led to the publication of a guide entitled ‘7 Steps to Using the Campus for Learning about Sustainability’1. Also the UK Green Gown Awards were mentioned, whereby each year universities in the UK compete for an award for innovative projects linking campus and curriculum (http://www.greengownawards.org.uk).

Curriculum Roundtable

The Curriculum Roundtable addressed the question of how universities can integrate sustainable development in their curricula. The following lead questions were discussed: How are decision-making processes for changing curricula structured at the different institutions? What are the main options to influence these decision-making processes? What is the fastest way to offer HESD to all students of a particular university – by integration or addition?

After introductory statements by the panel members, the whole group discussed the drivers of and barriers to integrating sustainability into university curricula, arriving at agreement on the following six ways to influence the internal negotiating process to increase the presence of sustainability in teaching:

- **Start with additional courses in HESD**: Since integrating sustainability issues into all core courses of a given study programme is a long-term process, a more promising idea is to organise an additional course offering in HESD. The fastest way to offer courses in HESD is to make them elective. Introducing compulsory courses requires changing the examination regulations, which, without the support of open-minded colleagues, can prove to be a very protracted process.

- **Gain the support of open-minded people in the institution**: Negotiation processes are much easier if the respective decision-making committees, deans and colleagues are all convinced that HESD is a crucial element of the university’s mission. The challenge here is not only to convince colleagues of the responsibility the university has to advance a future-oriented development of society, but also to foster the readiness to deal with the institutional trade-offs HESD causes in the university.

- **Windows of opportunity**: The story of those higher education institutions which were successful in integrating HESD into the curriculum is a story of windows of opportunity. Most of these universities had to undergo a fundamental restructuring process that involved changing their profile as a university. This process depends on having a sound basis in the respective environmental and social sciences. A window of opportunity for all higher education institutions is provided by the Bologna process, which has as one of its main requirements the integration of key competencies into the curricula of all Bachelor’s programmes in the new European higher education area. HESD provides a framework for the development of such key competencies.

- **External pressure**: Universities are exposed to the different interests of numerous stakeholders, such as government, the labour market and funding agencies. In many cases organisational change in universities can be seen as a response to the pressures exerted by external stakeholders. Experience shows that giving voice to and orchestrating the sustainability-related interests of different (and sometimes quite diverse) stakeholder groups can help organisational actors to build up pressure within their institution for change towards a more sustainable university.

- **Internal drivers**: A sustainability declaration by the university can serve as a key internal driver as it allows members of the university to then specify the meaning of HESD by initiating internal discussions and negotiations about its integration at their institution. Other key internal drivers include the mission statement and sustainability guidelines, both of which can be derived from the declaration and adopted as a result of a broad discussion process in the institution.

1 [http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/files/extranet/docs/DoTLE/7%20steps%20to%20sustainability.pdf](http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/files/extranet/docs/DoTLE/7%20steps%20to%20sustainability.pdf)
Incentives for professional development: Lecturers are gate-keepers with regard to the delivery and interpretation of curricular contents. Any initiative seeking to promote HESD depends on the university teaching staff being willing to and capable of provide learning opportunities regarding sustainability challenges and issues. Capacity building for HESD does not only need new or additional teaching staff but also training opportunities for existing lecturers. The training programme must be embedded in a special set of incentives so that lecturers have the additional time necessary to develop subject matter and didactical competencies that are appropriate to HESD. There is evidence however to suggest that appreciation on the part of the university administration and by peer colleagues can play a more significant role than material incentives for lecturers involved in designing a modern and sustainable curriculum.

Community Roundtable

In the recent debate about HESD, the role of universities as members of society has received growing attention. The Community Roundtable focused on future perspectives and next steps for conceptualising, implementing and strengthening links between HESD and the neighbouring community to strengthen the universities’ impact on sustainable development in society at large.

The discussion built on the mutual understanding that sustainable development is a challenge at all levels of scale – micro, meso and macro – and is characterised by the need for long-term approaches and the involvement of multiple stakeholders with often conflicting interests. The inherent complexity and uncertainty of these challenges calls for fundamental changes – and not just for incremental changes leading to optimisation within established frameworks. There was broad consensus among the experts that there is a need to ensure that an understanding of the threats to and opportunities for survival and sustainability is widely diffused into all spheres and levels of development decision-making within society, politics, business and science. Universities have a critical role to play in this context.

Key future challenges identified by the experts in the Community Roundtable discussion were:

- Turn universities into ‘meeting places’: Universities should no longer be ivory towers where the main task of scientists is to simply educate the next generation of scientists. Modern universities are meeting places with doors and windows wide open to interactions with both the greater scientific community and society at large. This means that the reputation of the university is not only determined by international ranking systems, but also by the quality of its interaction with local, regional and national stakeholders while working on real-life problems relevant to the surrounding community and society at large.

- Engage students with the real world: Students are not merely passive consumers of tertiary education, but members of the universitas, the broader university community in which HESD should conceive of students as co-creators of knowledge, gatekeepers to the community and drivers of change. This implies that in addition to education inspired by high quality research within a disciplinary domain, learners must also experience interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives and learn to take into account different levels of scale, from local to global. In doing so they will experience that knowledge not only flows from the disciplinary domain where it is generated in fundamental research to the complex societal context of application, but that the knowledge to meet societal challenges must also be developed within the societal context itself. In addition to mastering disciplinary knowledge, competence development, a problem-oriented approach, authentic contexts and active, often collaborative, knowledge construction are key elements of a university education.

- Develop quality criteria and enhance quality assurance: The notion of universities as open meeting places implies that in addition to the generation of new disciplinary knowledge according to agreed-upon systems for quality control and assurance also new ways of context-embedded knowledge generation have to be developed and implemented. Transdisciplinarity and action research are keywords in this respect and in order to take account of these perspectives systems...
of quality assessment and control for research with a limited disciplinary scope need to be expanded. This also holds true for teaching, where a place for new HESD practices must be found in mechanisms for quality assessment and control, in accreditation and certification procedures.

Conclusion

The three roundtables discussed key dimensions of ‘sustainable universities’. The results show that small changes, such as implementing additional courses in HESD, are possible and helpful in all three areas – campus, curriculum, and community.

However, for meaningful change towards sustainability whole-university approaches are needed in which developments in the three dimensions are linked to each other. For instance, transdisciplinarity does not only call for new learning approaches in the curriculum, but it also has consequences for the relationship between the university and the community. The same holds true for the cooperation of researchers, students and ‘practitioners’ (e.g. providers of consumption-related offerings) on campus. Openness, participation, cooperation and dialogue are other aspects which are of importance for developing the ‘whole sustainable university’. To make such profound changes happen requires not only support from university members, progressive leadership and external pressure, but also the recognition and exploitation of windows of opportunity.