11th UNESCO-APEID International Conference
Reinventing Higher Education:
Towards Participatory and Sustainable Development

<Plenary Session 1: Paradigms of Development>

Innovation of Higher Education for Sustainable Development

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1. Role and Responsibility of Higher Education for Sustainable Development

It has been a historical fact long time verified that education plays a necessary and
decisive role for the economic, social and political development and impacts each
area on a tremendous scale. This common understanding and truth has been shared
by advanced and least developed countries alike.
Especially various reports by the United Nations have proved the inevitable links
and nexus between the role of educational development and economic growth
through many statistics and analytic surveys.¹

Looking back over the past times of my youth more than 40 years ago, how the
memories of dreadful poverty, terrible political oppression and serious social
conflicts compare with the changed situation of Korea’s modern-day economic,
social development and political democracy, I cannot but realize once again the
lesson that the driving force came from the development of knowledge and
technologies and transformation of social consciousness and value system through
education.

¹ UNCTAD has stated in the reports of the least developed countries 20007, “one of
the most important insights regarding development in the last 25 years is that
knowledge and learning are at the centre of the process of economic growth.”
(New York, United Nations, pp185)
Just as it is the case for development, I think, education plays the crucial role also for sustainable development because intelligent and technical development and behavioral changes through education are recognized as the necessary means and ways for sustainable development.

However we will have to question the type of education that could really bring such changes needed for sustainable development and also the agenda and means to teach sustainability.

Any education may contribute to the development, but it does not mean that the expansion of school attainment necessarily guarantees the improvement of economic, social conditions. The important thing is the quality of education and schooling, whether students are really learning what truly matters.

As the MDG proposes, the universal access of children to primary school education is the basic condition of development. It’s still a target, which cannot be easily reached within this decade.

However in order to drive our education more toward the sustainable development, we have to implement the quality education, that is oriented at the value and skills of sustainability into the various kinds and levels of education.

For these reasons, the role and responsibility of higher education can never be overemphasized or overestimated. Consequently I can observe the crucial role of higher education for sustainable development in three major areas:

1) Higher education, especially universities are responsible for researches and findings of the ways of sustainable development and the necessary knowledge and skills and also norms of behavior. Scientific and technological improvement for sustainable production and consumption should be carried on by researches of universities.2

The crucial role of higher education as the highly advanced and comprehensive knowledge provider is to find out the best way to bring about harmony and synthesis among the three pillars of sustainable development; economic,

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2 Regarding the role of IHE (Institutions of higher education), authors of Guidelines and Recommendations for Reorienting Teacher Education to Address Sustainability emphasize that, “The academic freedom of IHEs allows critical discourse of current knowledge and practices… This freedom of discourse enables the changes necessary to reorient education to address sustainability.” (pp 29, Paris, UNESCO, 2005)
environmental, and social tasks and issues, which are often in conflict with each other.
Institutions of higher education are not just simple provider of advanced knowledge and technology, but should be deliberating, and searching for the holistic view and concept of sustainable development and the necessary strategy and action plan.

2) Higher education incorporates institutions that train and produce teachers for primary and secondary education, and also for the vocational, technical schools. Quality education completely depends on the degree of qualified teachers and education for sustainable development can be practiced only through the teachers that have been trained and conscientized of the value and perspective of sustainability.
As the UNESCO’s position paper presented at the 3rd session of the preparatory committee of WSSD emphasized, Education for Sustainable Development should provide learners with skills, perspectives, values and knowledge to live sustainably in their communities.3
ESD is not a simple subject that can be learned through only knowledge transfer or text books, but through a course of interdisciplinary approaches to help the learners be familiarized with the complex problems of society and convinced of the necessary actions and involvement.
Teachers of ESD must be trained to carry out this kind of teaching job. And Universities are responsible for training these kinds of teaching personals.

3) Higher education also produces leaders and elites of the country and society, who are directing and managing political parties, governmental bureaucracies, economic institutes and private industries, all the stakeholders of sustainable development. If higher education fails to educate the students for sustainability, the future leaders of various sectors and areas cannot be qualified agents for sustainable development.
Sustainable development cannot be achieved or realized by some successful efforts of individuals or some groups in a sector. Stakeholders of sustainable development are from the broad areas of a country and society; scientists, businessmen, politicians, local governments, engineers, agricultural producers, journalists, students, and teachers etc.

So it is very crucial to educate and build up a vanguard group of leaders in each sector of society, public or private, that will take leading roles in promoting the values of SD and transforming the unsustainable sector toward the more sustainable society.

On the base of this perception and orientation the present situation of higher education should be reviewed and critically questioned on how much our universities are responsible and responding to the education for all and sustainable development goals and how our higher education can be reformed and innovated in order to meet the needs for participatory and sustainable development.

2. Critical Review of University Education responding to EFA and ESD

Regarding the present roles and functions of Higher Education for sustainable development, we will have to question frankly about the structural and programmatic situations of universities and colleges, as they are the representative and most influential institutes of higher education in every country.

If universities are concerned to their responsibility of education for sustainable development, they should think about ways to respond so that future graduates can deal with sustainability issues in their careers and lives, because universities play a vital role not only in shaping the future by educating the professionals of tomorrow, but also by creating a research base for sustainability efforts, and providing outreach and service to communities and nations especially related to difficult sustainability issues.

Then, let us think about and reflect critically on the situations of universities in our countries. How many universities do have research projects on these issues and do provide educational programs in their curriculum related to sustainability questions? Does my university have a special institute or department for research and training for sustainable development or for particular issues of sustainability in my region or community?

How much are our universities concerned and involved in the community development activities, whether they are economic, environmental or socio-cultural problems, and preparing and encouraging students to devote and contribute to the

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global issues like poverty, health, education and ecological crisis?

Among over the 200 universities and colleges in Korea, I can count only just a few universities that have established special institutes or programs for education for sustainable development. Of course, all the universities are equipped with many research institutes and projects. But most of them are doing some academic research and dealing with micro, and fragmental issues of science, technology, law, management and arts.

Our universities are still very isolated from society and social reality. They need to be more open to the needs of society and more connected with social innovation through partnership with civil society. 5

But Universities in many countries are remaining in the ivory tower isolated from the challenges by the rapid social change through globalization and technological revolution.

Equally or more serious than the problem of isolation and indifference to societal needs is the tendency toward unsustainable, or anti-sustainable research and teaching of the universities and colleges.

When the researchers and educators of university do not possess a strong awareness and sensitivity about what sustainability is, and how it is different from conventional philosophy and directions of development, they can easily produce unsustainable results in their academic activities. Especially many scholars in science and technology institutes, management and policy institutes are inspired too deeply by development ideology to neglect and devastate the principle of sustainability.

We have to remember that many kinds of industrial products and chemical goods with academic certificates, have proved to be unsustainable and harmful for ecological and human sustainability.

Even in our class of science education the perspective of environmental sustainability is neglected or lost. Victor Mayer criticized that the vast majority of science programs taught today are based on the outdated concept of a mechanistic

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universe and represent the distorted methodology and ineffective environmental education.⁶

Education for sustainable development should not neglect or forget the global dimension of sustainable future, and the interconnectedness of local and global development. However many research and teaching programs of university are oriented at the national developmental goals only and closing eyes on the global issues of sustainable world like poverty, illiteracy, war, and cultural diversity.

In this regards, reorienting universities to address sustainability is an urgent task so much as Reorienting Teacher Education.

3. Toward Innovative Higher Education for Participatory and Sustainable Development

Reorienting existing education at all levels to address sustainable development is very urgent and necessary, so that all citizens, young or adult could be educated to learn the knowledge, skills, perspectives and values of sustainability and to assume responsibility for creating a sustainable future and lifestyle. In this regard sensitizing children and youth in the basic and secondary education is most efficient and powerful, because their value system and behavior can be well changed through the reoriented education.

However, the crucial point is to have the qualified and committed teachers, who could deliver the reoriented lessons and convince the children of the sustainable awareness and behavior.
So the implementation of the effective ESD in schools is not possible, without the institute of higher education, universities being innovated and restructured.
Universities should play the role of capacity builder, in terms of training teachers and formulating the conceptual framework of appropriate education for sustainable development.

In order to meet this role and responsibility of higher education, what should be innovated in the university program and structure? I would like to mention only

some categories of university program to be innovated and transformed.

1) First of all, the Research institutes and program of universities should be innovated and changed to meet the needs of sustainable development. Since the concept of sustainable development is very broad and comprehensive, and also evolving and expanding, the establishment of a specialized institute of sustainable development is to recommend, in order to study on the holistic philosophy and contextualized methods of ESD and to maintain access to information and global cooperation networks. It can be a powerful knowledge center for ESD to understand the plethora issues in sustainable development.\(^7\) Other research institutes in science, technology, economy, law and management can be related to the themes of sustainable development, like environment, climate change, poverty eradication, health, human rights, peace and conflicts, sustainable production and consumption.

As the themes of sustainable development are multifaceted and multidimensional, the research work on ESD should be interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach through the formation of research clusters.

2) Educational program of universities in terms of curriculum of general and professional education should be innovated and improved in order to conscientize and sensitize students of sustainable development. Courses and subjects of university education are in general compartmentalized according to the diversification of academic principles and perspectives. But the goals and mission of ESD are to bring the learners to the comprehensive understanding and awareness on the needs of structural change to achieve sustainability.

So special curriculums for separate space and time to deal with the challenges of sustainable development is both sensible and recommendable, because this kind of foundational course is relevant for evoking responsibility to care for the earth’s limited resources and lives of the global human beings.\(^8\)

Educational programs for the environment, development and cultural heritage, peace and human rights can be integrated into the special course on ESD.

3) University programs, whether researches or education, or outreaches, should be innovated to develop partnerships with their communities, governments, industries and cultural institutes, so that the knowledge, skills and results of their


\(^8\) Kartikeya Sarabhai, a.a.0, pp 109.
researches can flow into society and also can be challenged by the needs of society.
Also institutes of higher education, have to strengthen the networks of cooperation and exchanges with other centers of excellence at the national, regional and global level in order to create synergies and mobilize greater resources and capacity to ensure sustainable development.
In this regards universities and higher education should be more globalized, and also localized.