CHAPTER 2

THE EVOLUTION OF SUSTAINABILITY DECLARATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of sustainability in higher education (SHE) was first introduced at an international level by the United Nations UNESCO-UNEP International Environmental Education Programme in 1978. Since then, a number of national and international declarations directly relating to environmental sustainability in higher education have been developed. These declarations have gained acceptance in the higher education community and have subsequently been endorsed and signed by numerous universities. The Talloires Declaration of 1990, for example, has over 275 signatories (University Leaders for a Sustainable Future, 2002) and over 291 educational institutions have endorsed the COPERNICUS Charter (CRE-COPERNICUS, 2002). How has sustainability been defined in these international declarations? How has the concept of sustainability in higher education evolved over the past 30 years? Such an understanding is essential to contextualizing present practices and beliefs in higher education. If we are to fully comprehend the current state of sustainability in higher education and how we might proceed in the future, we must first understand the evolution of sustainability declarations and how such declarations have helped higher education frame their commitment to sustainability in the past.

This chapter will describe the evolution of environmental sustainability declarations in higher education from the 1970s to present, and examine the patterns and themes that emerge from these documents. The focus will be on major international declarations such as the Tbilisi, Talloires, Halifax, and Kyoto Declarations, the COPERNICUS Charter, and the most recently created Lüneburg Declaration. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the implications the emergent themes in sustainability declarations have for the future.

A CHRONOLOGY OF SUSTAINABILITY DECLARATIONS

Environmental sustainability declarations specifically developed for higher education are relatively new, emerging in the early 1990s. There are some key...
international conferences, guidelines and directives, however, that paved the way for these declarations to come into being. The Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment in 1972, for example, discussed international sustainable development issues which had specific relevance to higher education. The Stockholm Declaration adopted at the conference discussed the interdependency between humans and the environment, the distribution of wealth, and the notion of intergenerational equity. Specifically related to educational institutions, the Stockholm Declaration called for environmental education for all people from grade school through adulthood so to “broaden the basis for enlightened opinions and responsible conduct by individuals, enterprises and communities in protecting and improving the environment in its full human dimension” (UNESCO, 1972, Principle 19). Also related to SHE declarations is the development of environmental education conferences and declarations. The Belgrade Charter (1975) and the Tbilisi Declaration (1977) for example, were both influential in the development of international environmental education and sustainability initiatives. The Tbilisi Declaration was the result of the UNESCO/UNEP Intergovernmental Conference on Environmental Education in 1977. It stated that in order for people to develop a better understanding of the human-environment relationship, formal and non-formal environmental education opportunities should be made available to people of all ages and level of academic aptitude. In a statement regarding the role higher education could play in achieving environmental sustainability, the Declaration asked colleges and universities to consider environmental concerns within the framework of the general university:

Universities, as centres for research, teaching and training of qualified personnel for the nation, must be increasingly available to undertake research concerning environmental education and to train experts in formal and non-formal education. Environmental education...is necessary for students in all fields, not only natural and technical sciences, but also social sciences and arts, because the relationship between nature, technology and society mark and determine the development of a society (UNESCO-UNEP, 1977, p. 33).

Additionally, the Tbilisi Declaration asked universities to consider the development of environmental curricula, engage faculty and staff in the development of environmental awareness, provide specialist training, engage in international and regional co-operative projects, and inform and educate the public regarding environmental issues. As we shall see, all of these initiatives were echoed in the SHE declarations that began to emerge more than a decade later.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development of 1992 also had a profound influence on the development of environmental sustainability declarations. This conference focused on issues of environmental sustainability and their application to various disciplines and fields. The publication of Agenda 21 was a direct result of the conference. Chapter 36 of Agenda 21 – Education, Awareness and Training, specifically addressed issues related to sustainability within educational institutions. Offering similar sentiments to the Tbilisi Declaration, Chapter 36 identified a worldwide lack of environmental literacy, and posited that formal and informal education was the solution to environmentally unsustainable behavior amongst humans. It called for reorienting education towards sustainable development, increasing public awareness of environmental issues and promoting