CHAPTER 9

ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABILITY: A FORCE FOR CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is becoming increasingly pertinent to higher education. Forward-looking higher education institutions are establishing relevant links between widely accepted policies on environmental protection, social justice, economic development and the way they run their institutions and provide learning experiences for students (see Forum for the Future et al., 1999; Benn, 1999; Calvo, Benayas & Guitierrez, 2002). These institutions are linking learning, innovation and competitiveness to sustainable development. Some recognise that a country’s future prosperity rests on its people’s ability to address sustainability issues and have embraced sustainability at its core – rethinking their missions, developing visions and strategic plans across the University (see Forum for the Future et al., 1999). Indeed, over one thousand university presidents and vice-chancellors have signed the Halifax Declaration (1991), Swansea Declaration (1999) Copernicus Charter (1994), Talloires Declaration (1999), Kyoto Declaration (1993) and Lunenburg Declaration (2001), committing their institutions to change towards sustainability.

Others, resisting systemic change but increasingly influenced by internal and external stakeholders, are responding through discrete initiatives or pilot projects which are impacting in some administrative and/or curriculum areas within their institutions (e.g. Fien, Heck & Ferriera, 1997; Bowdler et al., 2001; Tilbury, Reid & Podger, 2002). These projects are financed by intergovernmental agencies such as EU and UNESCO (e.g. Fien & Tilbury, 1996; Geli & Junyent, 2002); national and state government agencies (e.g. Watkin et al., 1995; Tilbury, Reid & Podger, 2002) and NGOs (e.g. Forum for the Future et al., 1999). Student bodies and other on-campus groups are also contributing by promoting sustainable living projects and influencing University practice through student union politics (e.g. Bowdler et al., 2001).

However, many of these efforts have focused on actions to minimise the ecological footprints of universities. This is being achieved through reducing levels of energy consumption, opting for more sustainable waste management practices and putting in place environmental managements systems to monitor impacts. A
number of these initiatives have also involved students in learning about and/or managing this innovative practice (Campus Earth Summit, 1995; Calvo, Benayas & Guitirrez, 2002).

It is now being recognised that a next and more critical step needs to be taken to address sustainability through higher education. This requires educating about and for sustainability through the taught curriculum (see Richardson & Ali-Khan, 1995; Alabaster & Blair, 1996; Benn, 1999; Bowdler et al., 2001). Calls to restructure higher education courses towards Environmental Education for Sustainability are being supported by the corporate sector, which seeks graduates with the personal and professional knowledge, skills and experience necessary for contributing to sustainability. Corporate stakeholders, attending a recent University-Industry Summit, argued that every student, regardless of specialism, should have opportunities to learn about and for sustainability in higher education (Tilbury & Cooke, 2002).

However, this form of education commonly referred to as Environmental Education for Sustainability cannot simply be integrated into existing curricula. Many attempting this task are encountering a number of challenges at the conceptual, planning and management level (UNESCO NIER, 1996; Yeung, 1996; Tilbury & Turner, 1997). This chapter defines the conceptual aspects of Environmental Education for Sustainability and describes how higher education institutions are beginning to grapple in practice with a process that has ‘learning for change’ at its core aim.

The chapter argues that Environmental Education for Sustainability is an innovative and interdisciplinary process requiring participative and holistic approaches to the curriculum. It cannot be inserted into existing teaching and learning structures. Environmental Education for Sustainability has a transformative agenda that requires, and often leads to, professional, curriculum as well as structural change (Robottom, 1987; Tilbury, 1998a & b). Innovation not integration lies at the heart of Environmental Education for Sustainability (Tilbury, 1998a). The chapter identifies the challenges that this transformative agenda presents to institutions in higher education. It sees this learning process as the next stage in the challenge towards sustainability and argues that only by engaging with Environmental Education for Sustainability, will higher education institutions contribute to building social capacity for change towards sustainability. It predicts that the institutions themselves will be the subject of change (and not just a vehicle for change) as teachers and students engage in making changes for a better world.

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At Johannesburg, UNESCO explicitly recognised the critical role that formal and higher education play in providing opportunities for social learning and change towards sustainable development (UNESCO, 2002 p. 7). Their WSSD document ‘Education for Sustainability: From Rio to Johannesburg’ (UNESCO, 2002) called for socially critical forms of learning which could help us transform the world we live in. To achieve an improved environment and quality of life, it argued, we need