

## HIGHER EDUCATION'S COMMITMENT TO SUSTAINABILITY: FROM UNDERSTANDING TO ACTION – UNESCO'S POINT OF VIEW

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As one of the co-founders of the Global University Network for Innovation, UNESCO commends GUNi on the dedication of its fourth issue of *Higher Education in the World* to 'Higher Education's Commitment to Sustainability: from Understanding to Action', as it is most timely and appropriate.

We at UNESCO place a strong emphasis on sustainable development and particularly on the contributions which higher education (HE) can offer. This has been demonstrated by two major international UNESCO Conferences, both organized in 2009, that I would like to evoke.

First, UNESCO, as responsible for implementing the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD), organized the UNESCO World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development (Bonn, Germany, March/April 2009).

Second, to mark a shift of emphasis towards post-basic education, particularly on higher education, UNESCO organized its Second World Conference on Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development' (UNESCO, Paris, July 2009).

The Bonn Conference Declaration underscores that the world faces substantial and complex challenges arising from values that have created unsustainable societies. The Declaration places a focus on the role of higher education institutions (HEIs) and research networks in Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) by encouraging and enhancing scientific excellence, research and new knowledge development for ESD. It also calls for identifying universities and other HE and research institutions that could serve as centres of expertise and innovation to develop and share knowledge and create resources for ESD.<sup>1</sup>

However, as stated by one of the authors<sup>2</sup> in this report, Sonia Bahri, the commitment of HE to sustainable development should be perceived in the broader context of social responsibility, a theme underpinning GUNi's mission but also highlighted at the 2009 WCHE.

Indeed, the 2009 WCHE addressed the new dynamics of a changing HE landscape, underlining its intrinsic connections with development. The Conference reaffirmed the social responsibility of HE and the fundamental role of HE and research in responding to the global challenges encapsulated in the Millennium Development Goals, and in particular underlined its crucial role in building inclusive, vibrant and diverse knowledge societies through the achievement of Education for All.

The participants of the Conference all agreed that 'at no time in history has it been more important to invest in higher education as a major force in building an inclusive and diverse knowledge society and to advance research, innovation and creativity' (WCHE Communiqué, Preamble).<sup>3</sup>

However, with the impact of the economic crisis, HE is experiencing austerity in all countries, developing and developed alike. Higher education must do more with less.

The two principal trends in contemporary HE are the rising demand for it and its massification. Nearly one-third of the world's population (29.3%) is under 15 and today there are 158 million people enrolled in tertiary education.<sup>4</sup> Projections suggest that participation will peak at 263 million in 2025. Accommodating the additional 105 million students would require more than four major universities (30,000 students) to open every week for the next fifteen years.<sup>5</sup>

I don't think we have yet come to terms with the expansion of HE that is going to take place in the next decade.

To assure the sustainability of HE, especially in the developing world, new dynamics are at play and must be embraced enthusiastically in order to respond to this significant challenge. However, widening access to quality HE through a diversification of providers, and identifying and promoting innovative and multiple sources of funding will not be sufficient to assure its sustainability.

A session at the WCHE addressed, specifically, the issue of HE and sustainable development, concluding that sustainable

development must be understood today as a process in which human beings are actors of change and called for a move from expectation to action, which the GUNi Report captures. The role of HE is to continue educating citizens to be the agents and facilitators of sustainable development and be in close contact with its community and include academics, community members, civil society and government.

In addition to widening access to quality HE and interacting closely with the wider community, a shared challenge of HE worldwide is a common need to increase the relevance of programmes and to enhance the employability of graduates.

Trends show that the number of unemployed graduates is continually rising due to different imbalances in the economy as well as imbalances in the relevance of HE programmes, curricula and content. The phenomena of unemployed and *underemployed* graduates are very common in many countries of the world and are of priority concern for many regions, including Africa, as outlined at the 2009 WCHE. While the economy and labour market shift and develop according to various actors and factors, employability lies within the province of HE.

Indeed, employability reinforces cooperation between HEIs and the labour market by connecting the areas of curriculum development and degree reform, institutional culture of quality, relevance, and social responsibility while it also relies on the academic knowledge base which is the backbone of traditional HE.

With employability as a goal and academic freedom as the framework, HEIs will retain and strengthen their status as integral elements of the Lifelong Learning knowledge society. This, in turn will hopefully contribute to the sustainability of HE systems, especially in more fragile states, and constitute a significant part of HE's commitment to sustainability.

## NOTES

- 1 Bonn declaration, [www.esd-world-conference-2009.org](http://www.esd-world-conference-2009.org)
- 2 Sonia Bahri (2010) Social Responsibility of Higher Education in Addressing Major Global Issues. Paper present at the 5th International Barcelona Conference on Higher Education.
- 3 2009 WCHE Communique, [www.unesco.org/en/wche2009/](http://www.unesco.org/en/wche2009/)
- 4 ISCED levels 5 & 6 UNESCO Institute of Statistics figures.
- 5 British Council and IDP Australia projections.