

HIGHER EDUCATION AND SUSTAINABILITY: UNU'S VISION

Konrad Osterwalder

Higher education is one of the major determinants in the well-being of a society and of the whole world. What it is aiming for, what it is asked to deliver, what it achieves, what it needs, these are the most important factors to be considered.

One of the most burning problems of today and tomorrow is the question of whether we are able to move sufficiently fast towards the sustainable development of our society, whether we succeed in securing for coming generations a decent life in peace, in freedom and in good health, and whether we manage to pass on to them a world that offers them similar or even better conditions as the well-off part of today's world population enjoys.

If we aim at sustainable development, then two fundamental goals have to be formulated and must be achieved. In the first place, we must do research that tells us how to proceed to bring the menacing risks and shortages under control, and we have to take the necessary steps in the right direction. But second, we have to make sure that all our knowledge and all our insight is transmitted to the next generation. Our generation will not be able to solve most of the basic problems. We know now that many of the Millennium Development Goals cannot be reached by 2015, in spite of the enormous efforts and the good progress that is evident. It is up to the next generation, to the young people, to take a fresh look at the problems, with optimism and without prejudice. But for this to be successful we must offer the next generation a good education, we must hand over to them all the tools and insights that we and earlier generations have developed – that is the easy part of teaching and education. But we also must make sure that they know how to address a new problem, one that has never before been solved, maybe has not even been identified and formulated; a problem that requires openness and a new and critical assessment and that will force them to come up with original, innovative ideas and solutions. They have to rethink not only *what* has to be done, but also *how* it has to be done. Maybe our present power structures, the present balance

(or missing balance) between the three circles of society – political, economic and cultural – have to be revised and redefined so as to make the necessary societal adjustments possible. To help and support students to develop these abilities is the difficult part of education. This is of course true at all levels of education, but it is of particular importance at the tertiary level.

Envisaging sustainable development as a strategic goal, the United Nations University sees it as one of its main tasks to engage in research and capacity building in selected areas of problems that are crucial for sustainable development. With this in mind it develops strong partnerships between researchers, teachers and students from the developing and the developed world, thus strengthening the flow of ideas and knowledge from one part of the world to another and contributing to the building of greatly needed new capacities. One of the crucial steps will be the establishment of Twin Institutes, that is, institutes that have two campuses, one in a developed country and one in a developing country. Eventually, all institutes of UNU will have this twin structure. Another important step will be to establish UNU as a true graduate school, offering master's and doctoral programmes and degrees. The students will be taught in classes that truly bring together young people from all parts of the globe, and they will take place in at least two different parts of the world. They will be educated in the art of finding science-based solutions to the world's most burning problems. This means among other things that the programmes will not be structured according to scientific disciplines but rather following a particular complex of problems, thus reflecting the structure of UNU as a whole. In that context it is clear the focus has to be on genuine interdisciplinarity. Interdisciplinarity is best achieved by integrating relevant methods, theories of knowledge and the ontology of natural, social and human sciences. One of the most effective ways of being interdisciplinary in our academic pursuits is to follow a systems approach. Systems thinking means

that textual analysis, modelling, theory building, data analysis, interpretation, and so on, are woven together seamlessly without being constrained by disciplinary strictures and boundaries.

Higher education is the ideal carrier for the dissemination of the idea and the concepts as well as the practical sides of sustainable development. But our traditional institutions of higher learning have to rethink the way they are structured, the way they put together

their curricula, the way they choose their students and their faculty, the way they interact and collaborate with other parts of the world and last but not least, the way they are financed. The place and the role they play in the modern society calls for a thorough overhaul and many redefinitions. And society has to be convinced that the new ways of doing things are ultimately in its own interest.