



**International IAU Conference  
EDUCATION FOR A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE  
Charles University Prague, 10-11 September 2003**

**Report of Working Group 5  
“Sustainable University”  
(University as a corporate entity and its links to the outside world)**

**Moderator:** Tomasz Winnicki, President, Karkonoshe College, Wroclaw Technical University  
**Rapporteur:** Hans-Peter Winkelmann, Secretary General, European Association: COPERNICUS-CAMPUS, Germany

This working group brought together 25 participants including students from 17 countries (see attached list of participants) to discuss the institutional role of universities<sup>1</sup> in the overarching process of achieving sustainability. However, as the title “Sustainable University” was put in quotation marks, some uncertainty was expressed in the discussion as to what such a title meant or how it was supposed to be understood.

The range of expectations expressed by the participants was very broad, starting with conceptual issues such as “What should the design for a sustainable university look like?”, “How could sustainable development be integrated into higher education?” and “How could a management plan for the implementation of sustainable development into higher education be developed?” and proceeded to more specialized topics such as social justice, the international relations of universities, and environmental issues. The need for higher education institutions to transform themselves in order to sustain their own future was also discussed.

The overall discussion in this WG thus started from this point, as participants tried to define the exact topic for deliberation. The questions “What is a sustainable university?”, or “Should we rather talk about a ‘university for sustainability’?” were raised.

In order to address these concerns in a more concrete way, the participants decided to approach the issue from the following point of view: What can universities do in concrete terms to contribute to sustainable development, and to help society meet the challenge of sustainability?

---

<sup>1</sup> The terms „University“ is used in this report as synonym for all institutes of higher education

The working group participants began by considering these questions with respect to the rather traditional role of universities: looking at society, criticizing, and taking a lead. The participants emphasised in particular the responsibility of universities to society, which was seen to be present in the three core functions of universities: the research function (generating new knowledge on sustainable development), the teaching function (applying this new knowledge through education) and the service function of universities (spreading new knowledge to outside partners such as business and industry, governments, NGOs etc.). It was also pointed out that universities have – in addition to their core competencies in education and research – a certain social responsibility which makes them different from corporate entities. However, participants realized that democratic societies are complex and consist of many stakeholders. The problem that thus arises is: To whom should universities address their service? It was agreed that universities must go beyond the business case and must add the moral case because universities are responsible to society. In this context, a “sustainable” university is in the first place a “responsible” university.

Having reached a general agreement within the WG that universities have already contributed a great deal to sustainable development thus far – whether intentionally or not – the participants concluded that a fourth dimension must be added to the discussion on how universities contribute to sustainable development, namely the institutional dimension. The WG agreed to focus on the institutional resources, or institutional capital, of universities and how to develop, organize and use it to empower higher education institutions and enhance their organizational capabilities. In this context, it was stated that universities have a model role to play in society, and that it is becoming increasingly important that they practice what they preach.

In order to apply their institutional capital to society, universities must ask society what it expects them to do. The issue therefore needs to be reframed in terms of how to interact with the community so that the university confirms its non “ivory tower” position. In the discussion, the question was raised what a university can actually do to address the biggest problems of the world, e.g. how to fight unemployment, how to fight poverty, how to promote economic growth so that, at the end of the day, one can say that this university has done something good for society.

To define a “university for sustainability”, the WG concluded that the traditional characteristics that make a university are not new when we talk about the contribution to sustainable development, but they are becoming increasingly important. Perhaps the most important criterion that makes a university “sustainable” is the quality of the teaching and learning process. The question as to whether the current situation actually meets the need was discussed. It was agreed that quality assurance must become an integral part of a sustainable university.

After having reached this agreement, the participants discussed how to organize this process. It was emphasized that it would be important to point out the benefits for universities if they would more strongly contribute to SD. Sustainable development should become the “case” for universities.

In order to achieve this, the following steps were discussed:

- Change management
- Do research for sustainability
- Structural changes/managerial changes

- New investments
- PR / Awareness raising

Such process would include:

- Self-commitments
- Institutional development
- Human resources development
- Accountability
- Governance
- Appropriate financing
- Stakeholder management
- Networking
- Partnership building
- Participation (including students)

In this context, the WG also discussed the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) Toolkit on Reorienting Higher Education toward Sustainable Development. Although there was some concern expressed regarding the acceptance of toolkits in general (“you can bring a horse to water, but how do you make him drink?”), the participants agreed that such a toolkit could provide a framework that offers broad guidance with the necessary flexibility to be adapted in a process-oriented approach. The toolkit should therefore use examples and case studies and put the exchange of experiences at the forefront: what have other universities done and why have they done it? It was made clear that there is a need for guidelines for professionals and for a holistic approach to get everybody involved.

## **Conclusions**

It was concluded that a sustainable university is a university that serves society well by meeting its needs and by meeting the challenges entailed in the concept of sustainable development. However, it was also pointed out that a special “Sustainable University” does not exist. After talking about all the sustainability issues, in the end the idea of the “university” in the ideal sense was discussed. Sustainable development is inherent in the mission of universities when it is well taken. We should not talk too much about the creation of a “sustainable university”. We should rather discuss sustainable development and what universities have to contribute, but this will not lead to a new university.

Universities must understand that they are very important stakeholders in the process of achieving sustainability. Universities have a voice that they must use better so that all will hear them. The need to involve leaders of universities was underlined in this context as well.

In fulfilling this role as a stakeholder, universities must be compared with other stakeholders, e.g. business, local authorities, NGOs. In particular the interaction between business and universities was seen as extremely important, because where both sectors meet, development is taking place! Universities must therefore be perceived as partners and the participation of universities in the process is very important. There must be awareness that different stakeholders speak different languages; universities should try to overcome this and to facilitate the discussion.

In order to support this advocacy role Universities must more actively participate<sup>2</sup> in a stakeholder dialogue.

List of participants Working Group 5:

1. John Nolan, IRL
2. Jens Aaage Hansen, DK
3. Stephen Martin & Mrs Martin, U.K.
4. Everhard van Kemenade, NL
5. Tomasz Bergier, PL
6. Dior Amadou, CH
7. Kuniko Tanioka, JAP
8. Kokuko Sagabe, JAP
9. Liliana Simionescu, UNESCO
10. Mori Wataru, JAP
11. Vladislav Kotchekov, UNESCO
12. Marie Vojtikova, CZ
13. Patricia Burr, U.S.A.
14. Kabayashi Kazuya, JAP
15. Niklas Wretling, SE
16. Pedro Medellin Milan, MEX
17. Clemens Mader, AT
18. Gavin MacDonald, U.K.
19. Hennie Snyman, RSA
20. Mohamad Abbas Choudhary, PAK
21. Dirk Pilari, UNDESA
22. Juan Jose Sanchez-Sosa, UDUAL
23. Moussa Ouattara, Burkina Faso

---

<sup>2</sup> . With this in mind, the COPERNICUS University-Industry Forum for Sustainability, to be held in Bonn (Germany) in February 2004, was mentioned as an important event to allow universities to play a more active role.