

“Higher education and sustainable development”

University 2012 international conference

ADG/ED, 16 February 2012, Havana

Your Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to have the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience today. I recognize many Ministers of Education and Higher Education, university Rectors and top educational specialists.

We are gathered here today, in a country that has devoted considerable resources to expanding learning opportunities, because we believe that education is the key to a better future.

I do not need to tell you that the global community today faces an unprecedented set of challenges. Some of these are relatively new – issues such as climate change, access to clean water and threats to biodiversity – while others, such as poverty, ill-health, the need to protect human rights and promote equality among people – have been the subject of fierce debate and efforts for many years.

Experience has taught us that addressing each of these issues individually does not bring about long-term improvements. Similarly, fixing the problem, and not the source of the challenges we face, is not a sustainable solution.

We will not achieve sustainable development with technological solutions, regulatory frameworks and financial instruments alone.

What, then, *do we need*?

My answer, and I believe the answer of those of us here today, is more, and better, education. As lead agency for the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, which began in 2005, UNESCO promotes the idea that well-designed learning programmes can help us to transit to sustainable lifestyles.

Our vision is ambitious but clear: Every human being, without discrimination, should benefit from an education that fosters the values, competencies, knowledge and skills to shape a future in line with the demands of sustainable development.

This means integrating themes relevant to sustainable development – such as climate change, biodiversity and disaster risk reduction – into education plans and curricula. It also means organizing teaching and learning in a way that encourages students to think critically. In this way, students will develop the skills necessary for true sustainability: skills such as the ability to understand complexity, think in an interdisciplinary way, participate in decision-making processes, and cooperate with others.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As institutions that not only transmit knowledge, but are also at the forefront of creating it, universities are central to bringing about sustainable societies.

Higher education institutions train individuals to become highly-skilled in areas of critical importance to socio-cultural, economic and environmental development. They foster responsible citizenship. They carry out highly-regarded research and develop innovations. Within the education system as a whole, they often train teachers for primary, secondary and even non-formal education, and design curricula. They fashion the leaders of tomorrow.

UNESCO works with governments to develop higher education systems based on the principles of sustainability. We promote actions in three areas in particular.

First, *teaching and learning*.

We all agree that it is of the utmost importance that the decision-makers of the future be equipped with the values, skills and knowledge to promote sustainable development. This means integrating the concept of sustainable development into all subjects. It may also be useful, as Leuphana University in Germany has done, to require undergraduate students to take a course on sustainable development as part of their overall study package, regardless of their area of focus.

Of course, teachers must be adequately prepared to teach about a subject about which many have little experience. This is why UNESCO is currently

piloting a six-day course for teachers on climate change education for sustainable development in 10 countries.

Second, universities – and funding agencies – should *encourage and undertake appropriate research*.

There is no doubt that high-quality research can help us find solutions to the challenges we face. Moreover, given the complexity of sustainable development, this research requires an interdisciplinary methodology that universities are uniquely placed to provide. Indeed, questions such as renewable energies; sustainable urbanization; and consumption patterns are often best addressed through an approach that brings together disciplines such as science and technology, geography, economics, sociology and psychology. The Sustainability Institute at Stellenbosch University in Cape Town, South Africa, has introduced one such successful transdisciplinary doctoral programme.

Third, universities must *set the agenda* and be role models in their local communities – and indeed globally. They must act as think tanks and offer policy advice to governments. At the same time, they should design their internal processes and campus management along the lines of sustainable development, such as by imposing the efficient use of energy. University gardens and farms can produce much of the food consumed on campus, and seed grant programmes can support ‘greening’ projects initiated by students. For instance, the Universitas Gadjah Mada in Indonesia has developed a model of community service based on indigenous knowledge

and local potential that brought significant assistance to communities after the May 2006 earthquake.

I am convinced that students who have been exposed to sustainable development practices will take them with them into their professional lives. At the same time, the wider community will be able to look to universities as a model to be followed.

Your Excellencies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

The principles of sustainable have become increasingly influential in the education community in recent years. Many universities are adopting sustainable development as a key part of their mandate. They are doing this because of the responsibility they bear towards wider society, but also because being 'sustainable' in outlook makes them more attractive to students and the communities in which they are located. They also recognize the importance of sustainable development principles in enhancing the quality of education and improving student motivation.

In order to reinforce efforts to integrate the principles of sustainable development into higher education systems, UNESCO has become part of an important initiative launched by the Executive Coordinator of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in Brazil on 20-22 June of this year, 'Rio+20'.

Together with other United Nations agencies, such as the UN Environment Programme, we are encouraging university leaders – a great many of

whom are here today – to sign up to a declaration committing their universities to undertaking actions in the field of education for sustainable development.

It is my sincere hope that we will collect a large number of signatures and commitments prior to the beginning of the Conference, and that these will be followed up with clear and measurable actions.

This will be a step forward for the global movement in favour of higher education for sustainable development. Indeed, while the circumstances you face in your own universities and countries may differ, the task at hand is one that is relevant to all regions.

Distinguished guests,

By convening this Eighth International Congress of Higher Education on the issue of “The University for Sustainable Development”, the Ministry of Higher Education and universities of Cuba have demonstrated their commitment to engaging debate on a subject that is of vital importance to the future of our societies – and our planet.

With so many decision-makers gathered here in the next few days, we have a rare opportunity to put higher education firmly at the centre of international efforts in favour of sustainability.

We *can* create a world in which cooperation, rather than competition, drives innovation and progress in higher education.

As you debate the issues, I urge you to consider what concrete actions you can take – in your own countries and universities, but also with others – to translate the principles of sustainable development into clearly-defined actions.

Let me take this opportunity to thank the Cuban government, once again, for having organized this important Congress.

I look forward to hearing your ideas.