

PROPOSAL FOR A  
UNIVERSITY THEME OF “SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”

by

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ABSTRACT

To “sustain” means to perpetuate over time. A good working definition of “sustainable development” would be *development that meets our present needs while protecting the needs of future generations*. This proposal envisions that a University (as a whole) adopts the theme of “Sustainable Development – National and Global Considerations and Strategies” for, say, ten years. During this period EVERY student will come into contact with this theme in EVERY university course. This proposal fits well with the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005 – 2014. This theme will cover education *about* sustainable development (developing an awareness of what is involved) and education *for* sustainable development (using education as a tool to achieve sustainability). The last concept will come when students and faculty reach the stage where they can come up with research projects for local and wider communities.

INTRODUCTION

The working definition or concept of sustainable development stated above can be elucidated further by mentioning that we also include ecological sustainability, economic sustainability, and cultural sustainability. Therefore sustainable development must have ecological (or environmental), and economic, and cultural (or societal) objectives

We have rightly been discussing sustainable development for a number of years because there is a lot on this planet that is going wrong. One in five people in the developing world live in extreme poverty; 800 million people remain undernourished; hundreds of millions of people suffer from extreme disease; global energy is being used at a pace that will exceed the energy resources; our natural resources are deteriorating; parts of our planet have severe levels of pollution. (Dalal-Clayton et al 2002). We can no longer adopt the NIMBY attitude (“Not-In My-Backyard”). Any of the bad things happening in any part of the world is going to affect other parts of the world. We are all in the same boat – let’s all row in the same direction. We are not going to be able to sustain by passing laws and regulations and by holding more conferences, unless we combine these worthy activities with action. We need to show that we have the capacity to steward our environment – “environment” in the largest all-inclusive meaning of the word. This stewardship needs to be proactive and this means that we need knowledge. The ordinary citizen of the world can have an input into the question of sustainability. This does not have to be left to a “specialized class” – as per the Lippmann/Dewey debate (quoted in Fellerman 1997). But

we need educated citizens and universities around the world that can provide this education.

It is quite clear that in order to know what is going on in the world now (so that we can know what to sustain and how to do it), we need to make use of a Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Jack Dangermond (Dangermond 2004) has said that “As important as it is to describe the *actual* world using GIS and geography, I think it’s far more important to use GIS to imagine a *better* world.” This technology will have to be the centerpiece of any sustainable development discussion and program and most universities today have GIS units or departments.

A common failure of students in an Instruction Paradigm University is that they generally regard every course that they take as a separate entity divorced from other courses. A Learning Paradigm University (Tagg 2003) will help to change this and a major positive by-product of this proposal is that students will realize, during their learning, that the contents of all courses are connected and inter-related. This proposal will work towards a Learning Paradigm University in ways that John Tagg never envisaged (Tagg 2003). The initial thread that will tie all university courses together is that of “sustainable development”. In this proposal, it is essential that the University, at the highest level, buys into the idea of a multi-year theme.

## EDUCATION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Using the scholar.google.com search engine and other references, over a hundred references to “education in sustainable development” were found. Some of these will be mentioned below.

Many international conferences have recognized the importance that education plays in sustainable development. For example, Agenda 21, The Rio Declaration, The Johannesburg Declaration, Earth Summit+5, and so on. Some conferences sponsored or co-sponsored by The International Federation of Surveyors (FIG) have dealt with education in a tangential way but have emphasized land administration and management aspects. For example, The Bogor Declaration, The Bathurst Declaration, and The International Conference on Land Tenure and Cadastral Infrastructures for Sustainable Development.

A selection of some of the publications specifically dealing with Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is given below.

In “Education for Sustainable Development Toolkit” – a 142 page document- (McKeown, 2002) a lot of information is given on the theory of sustainability as well as case studies and ideas for projects. The idea for the ESD Toolkit arose because the author had a “...sense that community leaders and educators needed an easy-to-use manual that would help them get started in the business of educating for sustainable development”.

An example of ESD for the K-12 environment is “Education for Sustainable Development” by the Virginia Environmental Endowment and the Virginia Council on

Economic Education (Ellerbrock, 2002). This publication was prepared to answer the question “How can Virginia’s schools better prepare youth to make wise environmental decisions as adults in order to enhance the quality of life for all?” There are 12 units of theory and practical work in this publication geared to the K-12 environment.

A Steering Group for Sustainability published “Kinston University: Sustainability in the Curriculum” (Dawe et al, 2003). They recommended that there should be faculty and student training in sustainable development; that there should be practical initiatives that demonstrate a University commitment to sustainability education; intra- and extra-curricular workshops for students should be introduced; “co-ordinate sustainability education as a Key Skill with quality assurance processes and course review and validation processes; align sustainability education with the University Corporate plan; extend sustainability education in disciplinary and cross-disciplinary areas”. Three quotations on page 1 of this publication are worth repeating:

- *“You don’t have to be an expert to realize that sustainable development is going to become the greatest challenge we face this century” – Tony Blair 2001*
- *“...the people who will succeed 15 years from now, the countries which will succeed, are those which are most based on a sustainable vision of the world. That is what we should be training people to do” – Rt. Hon Charles Clarke MP (Secretary of State for Education and Skills) 2003*
- *“Universities educate most of the people who develop and manage society’s institutions. For this reason, universities bear profound responsibilities to increase awareness, knowledge, technologies and tools to create an environmentally sustainable future” – The Tailloires Declaration (Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future) 1992*

In “Sustainable Development in University Curricula” (Tsihrintzis et al, ? ) the authors indicate that in the Department of Environmental Engineering at Democritus University of Thrace some emphasis on sustainable development (as outlined in Agenda 21) appear in about 31 courses.

There are, of course, many other broader issues that we need to consider. For example, in “Education and Sustainable Development: challenges, responsibilities, and frames of mind” (Scott 2002), the author states that

*“It would be more ethical, and more useful, were we to acknowledge that the purpose of education in relation to sustainable development was to explore the concept and its implications, tolerating different views in this process, rather than to persuade people to accept it, whatever its implications.”*

Scott represents an environmental group that “attempts to aid in the development of an ecosophy, or, wisdom born of ecological understanding and insight”. We need to understand a lot of different views like those looking at “deep ecology” or “deep information” (see Fellerman 1997) in order to have an open discussion on all aspects of sustainable development. The ideal place for this discussion is the University. Fellerman says that “ ‘Deep Information’ represents a comprehensive meta-policy approach intended

*to facilitate environmental sustainability by enfolding the integrated analytical power of our new information systems.”* Is it time for us to consider “deep sustainable development”? However, all these discussions or conversations need to take place and, because of the inherent diversity of opinions, the best place for this conversation is the university. In a university the discussion can take place without considering the political implications of any suggestions. In addition, today most universities have information systems components so the vital connections between sustainable development and the information society can be examined, dissected and understood.

A very useful resource in sustainable development is “Sustainable development Strategies – A resource Book” compiled by Barry Dalal-Clayton and Stephen Bass (Dalal-Clayton et al 2002). In about 350 pages the authors cover a very wide field. The book includes a CD with the full text and other resource material.

## THE PROPOSAL

It is proposed that Universities around the world adopt the theme of “Sustainable Development – National and Global Strategies”. The very top administrations of the universities should buy into this idea of adopting a theme for a long period of time, say 10 years. At the end of this period ESD will be self-sustaining in that University.

The adoption of this theme and all that it entails will stimulate and encourage undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary research in the area of sustainable development. Centers, faculty, undergraduates, graduates and the community at large will interact in exploring and understanding this theme.

Sustainable development strategies give nations around the world the ability “to achieve positive economic and social development, without excess environmental degradation, in a way that protects the rights and opportunities of coming generations.”

The implications of adopting this theme are that:

1. In every course, English, Mathematics, Environmental Science, Nursing, Geographic Information Science (GISci), etc., etc., the topic of sustainable development will be discussed and used in illustrative examples at various levels of depth;
2. Every faculty member will attend a number of workshops where the theme is explained, discussed, first in general terms then later in depth. Outside experts will be brought in.
3. At some of the later workshops faculty (in different disciplines) will break out into small groups to discuss the theme and its implementation in their discipline as well as how the theme can be brought into their particular courses;
4. Over the time period that this theme will be in effect, students will encounter it in each course they take and will take from each course knowledge to build on to the theme in greater depth.
5. In as many inter-disciplinary courses as possible students will be asked to examine aspects of the theme and to present short papers to their classes;

6. All the above will encourage faculty and students to explore areas of the theme that need to be researched. This will encourage research over all units of the university and impress upon our students that they are part of a local, national and global community.

Each university adopting the theme of “Sustainable Development - National and Global Considerations and Strategies” will, in the first instance, need to select a small task force to look into the design and implementation of the theme.

## CONCLUSION

In order to make sustainable development work, the international community in ESD needs to work together to convince universities around the world to adopt the theme mentioned above, and needs to form a support group and a resource center for universities adopting the ESD theme. Exchange of students and faculty will emphasize the ONE world we all live in. Although universities around the world teach similar courses, the ESD theme in every course will have a lot in common but each university will also bring with each of its courses the special and unique local and national sustainable development problems and strategies.

We are all in agreement that our planet suffers from many human-made and natural ailments. If our generation does not take action, future generations will undoubtedly suffer and may pay the ultimate price. The world is “...increasingly complex, challenging, and crowded” (Dangermond 2004). We need to continue our conversations and discussions with the aim of being proactive. These conversations need to occur at many different levels in many different places. One of the most productive places for these conversations is at the University level where discussions can take place with a diverse, multi-disciplinary population and be open, non-political, exploratory and open-minded.

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