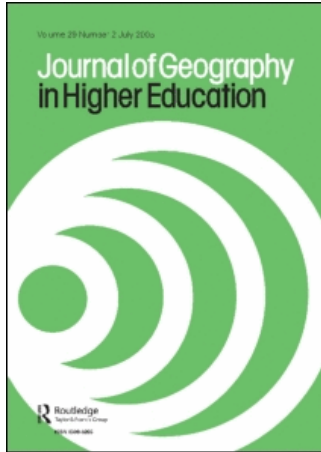


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### Editorial: Education for a Sustainable Future

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## EDITORIAL

# Education for a Sustainable Future

WYNN CALDER & RICHARD CLUGSTON

Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), Washington DC, USA

We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations. (Preamble, *The Earth Charter*, 2000)

The twenty-first century will be remembered as a time when humanity pushed itself to the very limits of Earth's capacity to support our needs and to regenerate itself to sustain future life. Unprecedented population growth, resource depletion, global warming and massive extinction of other species continue to raise serious questions about our relationship with Earth and all of its inhabitants. The interconnectedness of problems such as wasteful consumption, environmental degradation, urban decay, poverty and violent conflict are becoming increasingly clear.

Education for sustainable development (ESD) is based on the fundamental assumption that humanity must dramatically change its present course of environmental, social and economic development in order to ensure a healthy and secure world for future generations. January 2005 marks the beginning of the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014), offering all education stakeholders an opportunity to join an international conversation and to create and implement a 10-year vision for ESD. In one response to the challenge of the Decade, the Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership, which was founded in 2000, is conducting a multi-year global Resource Project to enable educators to more effectively advance sustainability at universities.

### What is ESD?

The content and methods of most education and training, as well as the messages delivered by mass media, are currently socializing us to live unsustainably. The critical question is,

what sort of education is necessary for us to pursue our various cultural and context-specific paths toward sustainability? ESD is the emerging alternative to education as usual. It builds upon a long history of environmental education, and derives its principles, content and strategies from Agenda 21, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) Work Program, the Earth Charter process, the Millennium Development Goals, and other major outcomes of the UN Summits. ESD is not another interest group—it is an urgent global priority.

Today, the messages delivered by mass media are currently socializing us to live unsustainably but so do the content and methods of most education and training. To proponents of ESD, traditional education fails us in at least three critical ways: (a) it fails to see the world systemically, particularly at the higher education level, where the majority of disciplines live in separate silos; (b) it fails to recognize values and attitudes as critical components of learning; and (c) it fails to provide practical application to fundamental local, regional and global problems.

Education for sustainable development is an emerging alternative to education as usual. It raises several key questions for educators: To what extent do we have a responsibility to understand the complex issues of sustainable development, to orient our research toward these issues, and to teach them to our students? How can our institutions more effectively model the right relationships with the natural world in terms of resource consumption and campus design? How can we support healthy community development beyond the boundaries of our schools? Although it is fundamentally about what we teach and learn, education for sustainable development goes way beyond the classroom.

For its proponents, ESD embodies the following qualities:

- interdisciplinary and holistic: learning for sustainable development embedded in the whole curriculum, not a separate subject;
- values-driven: sharing the values and principles underpinning sustainable development;
- critical thinking and problem-solving: leading to confidence in addressing the dilemmas and challenges of sustainable development;
- multi-method: word, art, drama, experience . . . different pedagogies to model the processes;
- participatory decision-making: learners participating in decisions on how they are to learn;
- locally relevant: addressing local as well as global issues, and using the language(s) which learners most commonly use. (UNESCO, 2004b, pp. 4–5).

Since sustainability represents a major shift in values, attitudes and lifestyles, educators must be broad minded and flexible in their approach to these complex issues. ESD must avoid ideology, and rather strive to ask important questions, pursuing ideas and strategies that fit the diversity of academic disciplines and university cultures around the world. Its critical question is: What sort of education will allow learners to pursue their diverse cultural and context-specific paths toward sustainability?

### **The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development**

In December 2002, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring a ‘Decade of Education for Sustainable Development’ (DESD) to begin on 1 January 2005.

The UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is serving as the lead agency of this Decade, and nations are being encouraged to establish their own Decade-oriented initiatives.

The Decade provides a significant opportunity for educators of all types to build upon 15 years of UN Summit outcomes, international conferences, case studies, tools, research and ESD in practice from the local to the global. Thus one of the tasks of the DESD is to consolidate these significant global efforts into a coherent and manageable programme for realizing a sustainable future. A second task is to shape education, training and public awareness initiatives, which prepare individuals, organizations and governments to practise sustainable living in their diverse cultural and social contexts.

In anticipation of the DESD, UNESCO prepared a *Framework for a Draft International Implementation Scheme* (July 2003; UNESCO 2003), followed by a *Draft Plan of Implementation* (April 2004; UNESCO 2004a), receiving thousands of responses to both documents from many stakeholders. The final framework, the *Draft International Implementation Scheme* (October 2004; UNESCO 2004b), was approved by the General Assembly in October 2004.

Many countries have been organizing for the Decade, some with official committees or councils for the Decade appointed by their national commissions for UNESCO (such as Japan and Germany), others with grassroots efforts (such as the United States), others engaging in both approaches (such as Portugal, Greece, the Philippines). A major task for UNESCO in the early part of 2005 is to assist in the launch of the Decade at international, regional and national levels. The tentative schedule for the international launch is January–February 2005, and for the national launches, April–May 2005 (see [www.unesco.org/education/desd](http://www.unesco.org/education/desd).)

### The Earth Charter

UNESCO recently adopted a resolution recognizing the Earth Charter as an important ethical framework for sustainable development and a valuable educational tool, particularly in the context of the DESD.

The Earth Charter is an international declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable and peaceful world. It is the product of a decade-long worldwide cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values integrating environment, social and economic dimensions of our global concerns and was completed in the year 2000.

The Charter has a Preamble, 16 main principles, 61 supporting principles and a conclusion. The first four main principles provide an overview of its ethical vision:

1. Respect Earth and life in all its diversity.
2. Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion and love.
3. Build democratic societies that are just, participatory, sustainable and peaceful.
4. Secure Earth's bounty and beauty for present and future generations.

The promise of the Earth Charter is that it provides an integrated ethical vision of sustainable development, building on a broadly participatory global consultation. It can assist in articulating a new framework for economic and social policies oriented not primarily toward short-term economic gain, but toward the full flourishing of life.

As Steven Rockefeller, chair of the Earth Charter drafting committee, states, "The Earth Charter focuses attention on the critical ecological and social challenges and choices

facing humanity, and emphasizes that in the final analysis the problem is an ethical one” (Rockefeller, 2003, p 4).

### **The Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership (GHESP) Resource Project**

GHESP (a partnership of the Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), COPERNICUS-Campus, the International Association of Universities, and UNESCO) is conducting a multi-year global Resource Project to advance higher education for sustainable development (HESD) worldwide by building international and regional networks, conducting major research on HESD, and providing regionally relevant resources and tools to scholars and change agents at universities. This is being developed in conjunction with the DESD (for more information on the Resource Project, see [www.ulsf.org/toolkit](http://www.ulsf.org/toolkit)).

ULSF is a leading international non-profit organization devoted to strengthening higher education's capacity to make sustainability and environmental literacy a major focus of teaching, research, service and operations. ULSF also functions as the secretariat for signatories of the international Talloires Declaration (1990), a 10-point action plan for incorporating sustainability into university life, which has been signed by over 300 presidents and chancellors worldwide.

ULSF activities include:

- membership support;
- research, publications, and resource development;
- campus sustainability assessment;
- building a US Partnership for the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development;
- conducting a Global Resource Project

Please visit <http://www.ulsf.org>.

ULSF is a major program of the Center for Respect of Life and Environment, which is an affiliate of the Humane Society of the United States. ULSF programs are paid for by grants from private foundations.

Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF), 2100 L St., NW, Suite 402, Washington, DC 20037, USA.

**Figure 1.** University Leaders for a Sustainable Future (ULSF)

The major goals of the Resource Project are to:

1. increase visibility of and higher education's contribution to the UN DESD (2005–2014);
2. develop and support a network of scholars and change agents focused on HESD;
3. review and conduct major research/scholarship on HESD;
4. provide critical reviews, tools, and case studies to support HESD through an interactive website, print materials and other media.

Over the past two years (2003–2004), ULSF, in collaboration with GHESP partners and special collaborators (United Nations University (Japan), Monterrey Institute of Technology (Mexico), Rhodes University (South Africa), Goddard College (USA) and others), has organized eight consultations in different regions of the world to bring together ESD leaders and stakeholders to determine available and needed resources, research priorities and strategies for making sustainable development a major priority of higher education. As a result of these efforts considerable progress has been made in setting the stage for advancing HESD globally throughout the DESD (Figure 1).

## Conclusion

The UNESCO strategy for the Decade states: “The international community now strongly believes that we need to foster—through education—the values, behavior and lifestyles required for a sustainable future. Education for sustainable development has come to be seen as a process of learning how to make decisions that consider the long-term future of the economy, ecology and equity of all communities. Building the capacity for such futures-oriented thinking is a key task of education” (UNESCO, *Framework for a Draft International Implementation Scheme*, July 2003).

This statement reinforces the notion that progress toward sustainability requires education that cultivates respect for diversity, more caring relationships between humans and the natural world, and more environmentally and socially responsible forms of development.

ESD is for everyone, and it takes place within a perspective of lifelong learning, engaging all possible spaces of learning, formal, non-formal and informal, from early childhood to adult life. We are each challenged to reform the various educational systems that touch our lives and the lives of others in our various communities, and to link with each other in the larger context of the DESD.

## Acknowledgements

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