

Chapter 45

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Criticisms abound regarding the quality and relevance of higher education. Addressing these criticisms requires innovative approaches including Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). This chapter examines the contribution of ESD to the quality and relevance of higher education. The chapter explains the concepts of quality, relevance, sustainable development, and education for sustainable development in higher education. Applying the concepts of systems theory and transformative learning, the chapter explores the contribution of ESD to improvement of higher education through strategies that empower learners with higher order skills. Many of the ESD learning outcomes and competences could translate into success in the lives of graduates in the workplace. The challenges to the adoption of ESD in higher education are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is in a crisis today because of the influences of new trends. The process of globalization has set a new vision for higher education, while life-long learning and continuous education have become theme songs for higher education (Adina-Petruta, 2012). Thus, the environment within which higher education institutions operate exerts a lot of demands on them for continual improvement of quality (Belawati and Zuhairi, 2007; Kok & McDonald, 2012; University Alliance, 2014). In order to continue producing high quality human resource suitable for national, regional and global economy, higher education institutions have to make adjustments for constant improvement. Numerous ways exist for improving the quality and ensuring relevance of higher education (Mangeol, 2014) and this chapter suggests ESD as one of the ways. In the chapter I present the argument that the principles, core values

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and practice of ESD bring about improvement in higher education. I also raise pertinent questions about what constitutes quality and relevance in higher education, and explain the concept of sustainable development and ESD and how it is implemented in higher education. In the chapter I further examine how different aspects of ESD enhance quality and relevance of higher education.

At the center of the dissatisfaction with higher education is the disconnection between the ‘ivory towers’ and society. Applying concepts of systems thinking and ideas of transformational learning, it is shown in this chapter that ESD can fix the disconnection and enable higher education institutions to fulfill the social mission of development. The main argument of the paper is that ESD provides educators with strategies to empower learners with higher-order skills that are much sought after by employers and other stakeholders. ESD can raise the quality and relevance of higher education in all its three missions of education, research and community engagement through a paradigm shift.

CONCEPTUALISATION OF QUALITY, RELEVANCE, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, AND EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality and Relevance in Higher Education

Quality in higher education has several definitions depending on the perspective used to define it. Thus it can mean exceptional excellence; transformative when dealing with learner empowerment; value for money when it is linked to efficiency and effectiveness; fitness for purpose which concerns fulfillment of institutional mission and perfection when it means zero-defect (Krcal, Glass & Tremblay, 2014). Quality has also been explained by Nikel and Lowe (2010) as embracing the dimensions of effectiveness, efficiency, equity, relevance, responsiveness and sustainability. However, what is important is that the discussion of quality has to encompass the tripartite mission of the university, that is, quality should involve good teaching, research and community engagement. Good teaching must be informed by the latest research and new knowledge (McAleese et al., 2013). A whole mark of quality teaching, according to McAleese and colleagues, is when both teacher and learner are actively involved in the educational process, begin to question and become critical thinkers. These are skills that are highly sought after by employers and external stakeholders of higher education.

Relevance of higher education refers to its fulfillment of the social, economic and political role (United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), 1991). It is discussed in relation to application of knowledge. Knowledge is said to be relevant when it can be applied. Relevance means ensuring that the intellectual and educational functions contribute to social, economic and political development of society.

Sustainable Development (SD) and Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)

ESD as a concept stems from sustainable development (SD). The most widely accepted definition of Sustainable Development is the one given by the Brundtland Report for the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which defines sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their

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