

Opportunities for universities in Southern Africa to participate in the UNDES

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Introduction

The majority of universities in southern Africa were established during colonial periods, hence their curricula tended to be westernised and of limited relevance to the African context. Critics have argued that higher education has largely remained academic, theoretical and influenced by western culture – even years after nations attained political independence from former colonisers. Calls have been made for a shift to a more practical and relevant education that addresses the needs of African people within an African context. In a bid to address this and other scenarios, the Southern African Development Community Regional Environmental Education Programme (SADC REEP) commissioned a consultative process on the United Nations Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (UNDES). The consultative process also indicated that education in southern Africa, including university education, is generally of poor quality and relevance (Lotz-Sisitka, Olvitt, Gumede & Pesanyi, 2005). The consultative process underscored the importance of addressing issues of quality and relevance of education within southern Africa. It is argued that environmental education processes add to the quality and relevance of education. In the wake of increased environmental and sustainability challenges, universities have been challenged to take a leading role in educating for sustainability, by providing quality and relevant education that is responsive to the students' needs and animates people for positive social transformation.

Having identified knowledge as a key factor for sustainable development, the United Nations (UN) proclaimed the period 2005-2014 the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development and the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) was appointed as the implementing agency. The aims of the decade as set out by UNESCO are: supporting efforts to promote development, which is socially desirable, economically viable and ecologically sustainable; integrating sustainable development into education systems at all levels in order for education to be a key agent for change; and promoting education as the basis for a sustainable human society and strengthening international cooperation toward the development of innovative policies, programmes and practices of Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO, 2005).

Before elaborating on some of the networks and fora for advancing ESD through Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in ways that support high quality, contextually relevant learning in southern Africa, we provide an overview of some critiques of ESD. Critics have argued that both the concepts of sustainable development (SD) and Education for Sustainable Development are not well understood (Tilbury & Fien, 2002, cited in Tilbury, 2002). Academics from southern Africa have also argued that Environmental Education is not a new concept because they have always been doing it so there is no point in changing to ESD. Other criticism emanates from the fact that sustainable development is a Western concept that is being globalised. The UN DESD is thus regarded by some as pushing a western

agenda (Lotz-Sisitka, 2004; UNEP, 2006; Demtchouk, 2008). Fien and Tilbury (2002, in Tilbury, 2002) warned that focusing on universal definitions actually defeats the whole purpose of sustainable development. They also warned about what they call "paralysis by analysis". By this they mean that there is a risk of focussing too much attention on debate at the expense of action. So instead of concentrating on debates on the defining of ESD or SD and their origins, they say it is more desirable to focus on action. Based on their critique, HEIs in southern Africa can explore the opportunities that exist for them to advance a southern African agenda through these concepts of sustainable development and Education for Sustainable Development.

We now turn our attention to some opportunities for universities in southern Africa to participate meaningfully in the UNDES. In line with the roles and functions of universities in promoting sustainable development, several networks and fora exist within the field of higher education and training to address the sustainability challenges southern Africa is facing. These include the MESA partnership forum, the SADC-REEP research network, Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) and EEASA.

The MESA Partnership Forum

The acronym MESA stands for Mainstreaming Environment and Sustainability in African Universities. The partnership was established by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) together with its partners, to support a programme to mainstream environment and sustainability concerns into the teaching, research, community engagement and management of universities in Africa. The MESA Partnership includes: An ESD Innovations short course (to strengthen capacity to establish ESD innovations in universities); Seminars for university leaders; A biennial conference providing an opportunity for universities to report on ESD innovations associated with the university's triple mission of research, teaching and community engagement, and to engage and pilot programmes linking universities, communities, business and industry in sustainable development partnerships (UNEP, 2006). Objectives of MESA are:

- To enhance the quality and policy relevance of university education in Africa in the context of sustainable development and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- To increase knowledge on ESD so that the future business managers, scientists and political leaders of the continent will incorporate values of sustainable development in their decision-making.
- Raise awareness and spread a new way of thinking about environment, development and society, beyond the university boundaries inside the many other social circles in which students, teachers and managers live.
- To offer opportunities for collaborative projects between universities/civic society/communities and the private sector.
- To contribute to the revitalisation of Africa's higher education system, and to strengthen African scholarship and African partnerships for sustainable development (UNEP, 2006).

Several universities in southern Africa are partners of the MESA Forum and have used the forum to showcase their research activities as well as to platform curriculum innovations. For instance, through participation in workshops and networking through the MESA forum, the University of Zambia developed and successfully implemented a Bachelor's Degree Programme in environmental education, which commenced in the 2008/2009 academic year. The University of Zimbabwe is using the forum to develop a Master of Science and Mathematics Degree in Environmental Science - hopefully the programme will commence in the 2010 academic year.

SADC REEP Research Network

This is a network of five universities in southern Africa involving the Universities of Botswana, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Rhodes University and the Mauritius Institute of Higher Education. The immediate objective is to support evaluation, research and innovation in EE and ESD processes through enhanced research and evaluation capacity and reflexive practice at the regional and national levels (SADC REEP, 2008). Through the research network, in 2007 the five institutions successfully conducted collaborative in-country mini-research projects on how EE and ESD can enhance the quality and relevance of education for all. Each institution conducted a case study in their country context, thus addressing environmental issues at a local level. The draft report is currently in circulation but some of the research will also be published in the *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*. This work has also been presented at a number of regional and international conferences including the fourth World Environmental Education Congress in Durban, South Africa in July 2007, and the 2008 Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA) Conference in Swaziland. The next research focus will be on addressing Millennium Development Goal (MDG) no. 7 (ensuring environmental sustainability). Besides conducting research, the network also provides opportunities for capacity building and information sharing towards improved EE practice. It is hoped that more universities will join the network.

Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs)

An RCE is a network of existing formal, non-formal and informal education organisations, mobilised to deliver ESD to local and regional communities. RCEs aspire to achieve the goals of the UNDES by translating its global objectives into the context of the local communities in which they operate. An RCE could involve schools, lecturers and students in higher education institutions, environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs), scientists, researchers, museums, zoos, botanical gardens, local government officials, volunteers, media, civic associations or individuals who work in the spheres of sustainable development such as social development and environmental protection. They build innovative platforms to share information and experiences and to promote dialogue among stakeholders through partnerships for sustainable development. ESD programmes are tailored to address issues in the local context of the communities in which they operate (UN- IAS, 2008). Within southern Africa, a number of RCEs have been set up, for example the Makana RCE, partnered by Rhodes University, the Makana Municipality and other stakeholders. Activities undertaken include: community nursery, composting, recycling and adult literacy programmes. This is one success story of a university acting as a link between communities, the

private sector and the municipality to work collectively towards addressing environment and sustainability issues. More RCE centres have been or are currently being set up across the region in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), Mozambique, Swaziland and Malawi. Other countries which are responding to the RCE initiative are Zambia and Zimbabwe, although this is still at the conceptualisation stage.

(EEASA)

Although not established exclusively for universities and the UNDES, EEASA is another forum on which universities can capitalise because it has well-established and functioning structures for research and networking in EE in southern Africa. EEASA is a network of environmental practitioners in southern Africa that seeks to bring practitioners together to share information on EE in a bid to improve EE practices in the region. Its overall aim is to act as a responsible body for the purpose of consultation and coordination on matters of public and professional interest concerning EE in Africa. Membership is open to teachers, conservation officials, community development workers, resource developers and researchers from SADC region and overseas. Besides the annual conferences, information is also shared through publications such as the *EEASA Bulletin*, published twice a year and the *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education*, which is published annually. The five universities in the SADC REEP research network, for instance, have used the EEASA forum to showcase their EE/ESD research to other EE practitioners outside the network as well as updating each other on activities taking place in different institutions.

This is a call for all educators in the universities in southern Africa to make a contribution to the UNDES. Institutions of higher education play a key role in educating for sustainability. African universities can take advantage of the UNDES and the networks outlined in this article to re-orient their education systems to addressing the needs of African people in an African context.

There may be little value in looking for one perfect definition of sustainable development to guide ESD. Rather, we can use the ideas related to sustainable development to reflect on the nature of our work and consider how we should work towards improvement (UNEP 2006 p. 45).

So don't get lost in the debates; take action!

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