

Mario Tabucanon and Aurea Christine Tanaka

The global education sector will mark the end of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (UNDESD) this November. It is an auspicious milestone with a number of important ESD events being held to mark the occasion. Among the most significant are the World Conference on ESD and the International Conference on Higher Education for Sustainable Development: Higher Education Beyond 2014, being held in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, and the 9th Global Regional Centres of Expertise on ESD Conference in Okayama, Japan. At each gathering, ESD stakeholders will reflect on achievements and lessons learned, as well as on challenges and how to advance the ESD agenda in a post-UNDESD framework. The United Nations University, through its Institute for the Advanced Study of Sustainability (UNU-IAS), will take part in these events in collaboration with its various networks.



*Panelists of the Second ProSPER.Net Forum on Sustainability in Higher Education**



*Professor Yuko Tanaka, President, Hosei University**

Established as one of UNU's responses to the implementation of the UNDESD, ProSPER.Net, the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network, focuses on integrating sustainability in higher education. The first ProSPER.Net Forum on Sustainability in Higher Education was held at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia, in July 2013 as part of the implementation of the ProSPER.Net Strategy and Roadmap. The second Forum continued the discussions on the state of higher education and sustainability in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond and took place on 10 July 2014. The Forum was hosted by Hosei University in Tokyo, Japan and was also considered a UNDESD celebratory event. In her opening remarks, Professor Yuko Tanaka, the first female president of the top 20 Japanese universities, emphasized that from its establishment, Hosei University pursues the core values of freedom, purpose, and global partnerships. In this regard, the university's support for ESD is reassuring in that Professor Yuji Suzuki, one of its prominent academics, is actively engaged with sustainability-related activities in higher education and was appointed as the Chair of the ProSPER.Net Board.

Dr. Ryutaro Yatsu, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of the Environment of Japan, graced the occasion with a keynote on the science-policy linkage in sustainability and underscoring the need for policy to be formulated and implemented based on the latest scientific knowledge. After the Rio Summit in 1992, the Ministry recognized sustainability as the main principle of environmental policy, with a key characteristic being the increasing permeability of sustainability issues in different



*Dr. Ryutaro Yatsu, Senior Advisor to the Ministry of the Environment of Japan**

fields, such as finance, social science, economics, education, international law, global trade, environmental science, and finally sustainability science that promotes an integrated approach to earth, social and human systems. Dr. Yatsu highlighted the ways in which sustainability science entered a new phase of supporting the implementation of sustainable actions in diverse areas such as energy, transportation, water and waste infrastructure, and also other relevant activities related to assessment, mobilization of resources and governance.



*Dr. Kazuhiko Takemoto, Director,
UNU-IAS**




*Professor Sivanappan Kumar, Asian
Institute of Technology (AIT)**

The forum also featured a panel discussion in which Dr. Kazuhiko Takemoto detailed the Global Action Programme (GAP) on ESD, being promoted by UNESCO as the post-UNDESD framework.

According to one of the panellists, Professor Sivanappan Kumar from the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT), ESD implementation can still be considered a work-in-progress despite the many significant achievements of the UNDESD. It is thus important to take stock of where ESD stands, what are the challenges and what lies ahead. To ensure that current educational systems are balanced and sustainability is mainstreamed, it is important to look at new pedagogies, figure out who the main players are, and explore ways of engaging the private sector and other stakeholders. Moving forward, it is imperative to scale-up ESD actions through GAP. Professor Kumar also noted how AIT's mission and programme offerings are geared towards sustainable development and thus tailored to implement ESD in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fellow panellist Professor Wang Xin explained that Tongji University is a sustainability-oriented university practicing ESD based on scientific knowledge. It has established a university-wide institute dealing with sustainability issues named UNEP-Tongji Institute of Environment for Sustainable Development (IESD), which serves as a sustainable development (SD) platform for the various colleges of the university. Sustainable development is a required course for all university students and the university engages with various SD-related networks including ProSPER.Net and the UNEP Global Universities Partnership on Environment for Sustainability (GUPES). It also organizes an annual student SD conference and other SD-related conferences and events.

 *Professor Wang Xin, Tongji University**

 *Professor Mario Tabucanon, UNU-IAS**

There are higher education institutions that are abreast of SD, ESD and the goals of the UNDESD, for which they ought to be applauded. However, when looking at the higher education landscape, there is still a vast majority of institutions unaware of the existence and goals of the UNDESD. This is the biggest challenge for GAP implementation according to Professor Mario Tabucanon, Visiting Professor at UNU-IAS. The various achievements of the UNDESD are commendable, but the mission is yet to be accomplished. The strategic actions of ProSPER.Net are much in line with the priority action areas of GAP, namely advancing policy, transforming learning and training environments, building capacities of educators and trainers, empowering and mobilizing youth, and accelerating sustainable solutions at the local level. There is a clear need to strategize actions to exert more influence on policymakers, especially for those higher education institutions championing ESD and SD in their curricula. For those higher education institutions that are not in the forefront of sustainability, there should be more support for wider engagement in capacity-building of human resources and governance for ESD implementation.

The second ProSPER.Net Forum on Sustainability in Higher Education also included discussions on a range of core issues, such as the transdisciplinarity aspects of ESD, as well as stakeholders' involvement for policy-making and implementation. Panellists were mindful of the role that higher education plays in fostering capacity development, education and research, and emphasized the need of qualified professionals from different backgrounds working collaboratively to address common issues. Also mentioned was the necessary participation of various stakeholders in local initiatives, not only to help translate the global agenda into local actions, but also to stimulate significant transformations in higher education so that it becomes more reflective of the real demands posed by society. In this sense, some panellists advocated the expansion of green campus programmes as one way of providing an opportunity to experience sustainability concepts and thus increase the chance of outside campus practice. Panellists also highlighted ProSPER.Net as a platform that enable these types of experiences with its various capacity building programmes that look into sustainable solutions transferrable to other contexts.

In conclusion, the open forum dwelt on the important issue of political will as an imperative to instigate institutional changes towards sustainability. It is essential to engage policymakers and only logical that GAP's first priority area is on policy support. Another essential element of promoting ESD and SD is the value of local actions, shared solutions, linkages with other similar networks, as well as in ensuring that transdisciplinary curricula and research become a reality in every higher education institution. Specialized sciences and policy-making for sustainable development must be bridged through sustainability science. Thus the need for an enhanced science-policy linkage, always keeping in mind that implementation of policies and scientific solutions are essential to move the world towards a sustainable path for the future.

**All photos courtesy of Hosei University.*