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**Working Paper**

**Developing Leaders for Sustainable Development:  
Networking in Higher Education**

**by**

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***Key Messages***

*Integrating the vision of sustainability in higher education means to challenge the status quo, to build a culture of change for reforming higher education institutions and restructure unsustainable processes and practices to shape the leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Networking is a strategic approach to effectuate the needed transformation in the sector and the experience of ProSPER.Net suggests the following:*

- *Networking can create opportunities for change and innovation, helping to transform higher education institutions and integrate sustainability thinking into their work.*
- *Multilateral networking through initiatives such as ProSPER.Net can facilitate cross-cultural, multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder dialogues, strengthening the interface between science, policy and society, thereby linking education and development. Curriculum change towards sustainable development can be effectively achieved with a pilot network project, followed by dissemination of knowledge and practices to the wider network community and beyond.*
- *Capacity building designed within a network setting favours diversity of cultural and academic background, enables higher education institutions to offer innovative programmes, and enhances regional and global knowledge transfer to a young generation of professionals.*

**1. The Need for Leadership and Vision for Sustainable Societies**

Creating sustainable societies requires transformation through effective leadership at all levels of governance — global, national and local — and by community members. Such leadership demands a vision that translates a global agenda into national and local contexts. To spread the message of sustainability means to challenge the status quo, especially the reality of unsustainable practices, and to overcome barriers to the fostering of sustainable ways of living. For this vision to become a reality, it is imperative to develop capacities, motivate people to relate personal and organizational goals to community aspirations, and implement good governance.

The vision of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD; 2005–2014) was to create a world in which everyone had the opportunity to benefit from education and adopt the values, behaviours and lifestyles, required for a sustainable future and for positive societal transformation. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) requires reforming the structure and nature of basic education, reorienting existing education programmes, developing public awareness about what sustainability means, and building capacity in education systems, both formal and non-formal. In this context, it is essential to consider culture, as underlying and critical. ESD requires not only the understanding of social institutions and their role in change and development, but also awareness of natural resources, sensitivity to the limits and potential of economic growth, its impact on society and the environment, and finally ways of behaving according to sustainable practices.

Current learning systems do not sufficiently prepare people to contribute to sustainable development. Sustainability topics, such as climate change, biodiversity, green economy, and sustainable production and consumption, need to be integrated into teaching and learning, and should be designed in a participatory, learner-centered way. This approach can develop flexibility, legitimacy and ownership, fostering an increased sense of responsibility for our common future. Education, therefore, ought to enable people to foresee, relate, face up to, and solve the problems that threaten life on Earth and correct social and economic injustices in the process. It should disseminate the values and principles that are the basis of sustainable development, and highlight the complexity and interdependence of the spheres in which sustainability practices unfold. ESD is interdisciplinary, holistic, value-driven and focused on critical thinking and problem solving. It is multi-methodological and participatory in decision-making, as well as locally relevant. The great challenge is to develop leaders that are well rounded and conversant in sustainable development. One way forward is through higher education

functioning in a network-aided approach that is transformative and aims to produce the leadership needed for innovation and societal change.

## **2. The Multilateral Networking Approach**

Networking in higher education offers an effective strategy for promoting innovation and international research collaborations, sharing of experiences, and facilitation of cross-cultural and multidisciplinary dialogue. In comparison to standard models of education, in a network of actors from multiple backgrounds, the sources of knowledge as well as opportunities for exchange multiply. Networking strengthens the interface between science, policy and society, and links education and development. Networking can create opportunities for institutional change and advance innovative practices that are trialed and widely shared within the network and beyond.<sup>1</sup> International networking, therefore, is an opportunity for a global agenda to be translated into local actions.

Partnerships developed in a network have been emphasized as mechanisms for sustainable development implementation since the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and were utilized as a strategy during the DESD. The UNU-IAS ESD programme is an example of such an approach. It promotes regional multi-stakeholder learning networks through Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) on ESD, and strengthens the role of higher education institutions in addressing sustainable development through the Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network (ProSPER.Net). The latter is an alliance of leading universities in the Asia-Pacific committed to integrating sustainable development into postgraduate curricula.

ProSPER.Net was launched in 2008 and explores the advantages of networking to structure knowledge and design innovative programmes, offering learning opportunities that otherwise would not be available in the traditional disciplinary settings.

The following sections provide evidence of how the networking strategy, used as a policy instrument, can transform higher education and produce graduates with the necessary leadership skills and knowledge on sustainability.

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<sup>1</sup> OECD 2003, *Networks of Innovation: Towards New Models for Managing Schools and Systems*.

### **3. Integrating Sustainability in Curricula**

Development of sustainability-minded leaders requires that sustainability issues are integrated in academic programmes and curricula. The network approach favours the establishment of joint research projects among member institutions in different countries. These collaborations lead to development of models and case studies from the different regions, highlighting the challenges, lessons learned, and good practices of integration and implementation of sustainability thinking in institutional processes and projects. Pilot models may then be further utilized for upscaling and adoption by other members.

In the case of ProSPER.Net, the integration of sustainability in curricula has been addressed through projects on business, the built environment, biodiversity, energy, climate change and health. New courses on sustainability have been introduced in some member institutions, and ESD mainstreamed in academic courses and programmes. These opportunities emerged from members familiar with the sustainability message and committed to implementation, but became possible through the more open and flexible approach developed by the network.

For instance, the built environment (engineering, building and architecture) project initially looked at how sustainability was integrated into the curriculum of different programmes across nine countries in Asia-Pacific (Australia, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam). Based on this initial survey, individual experiences and the existing literature on the changing needs for transformative education, project members designed a workshop with the specific purpose of discussing how to create a curriculum for built environment that integrates sustainability thinking. Industry stakeholders took part in the workshop to provide their views on the educational gaps and learning outcomes that should be considered in redesigning of the curriculum. The project output was a guide for built environment disciplines that serves as a roadmap in assisting higher education institutions in the restructuring of their curricula. The next stage of the project is to implement the guide in different contexts. Project leaders were encouraged by the initial interest from regional World Bank offices in piloting the guide. This is part of a global trend on knowledge structuring and management that provides access to good practices from different countries and across regions, leveraging communication capabilities offered by information technology.

To meet today's challenges of sustainable development, aspiring policymakers need to understand cross-cultural linkages and have a basic understanding of the scientific, economic, environmental and social aspects of specific problems. The ProSPER.Net e-learning course on "Sustainable Development for Policymakers" developed an open-access learning platform relevant to sustainable development problem-solving in the Asia-Pacific region. The course provided convenient, easily accessible, quality-controlled and relevant learning tools through a unique combination of modern web-based technologies and pooled resources of an expert network. The e-learning programme which was developed jointly by network members and piloted at TERI University benefits other members as well as universities and other knowledge institutions outside of the network.

#### **4. Capacity Development – Young Researcher's School and Leadership Programme**

Capacity development is one way of addressing the DESD call for public awareness and "training of trainers" in all sectors of society. The ProSPER.Net Young Researcher's School makes use of its members' location in Asia to expose students and young professionals to different realities and local solutions implemented in response to sustainability challenges. The School has been hosted in Vietnam, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, China and India. The experience and networking is further enhanced by the diverse backgrounds of the participants, from the social and natural sciences. The programme design goes beyond the simple delivery of contents, and offers activities to develop research communication skills and intensive interaction between students and experts. It provides opportunities to experience real solutions through field trips and discussions with local communities. The programme structure and its diversity of locations, themes, experts and students, is only possible through a network, leveraging on the diversity of human and natural resources. The School also functions as an incipient network of young professionals who will carry out its lessons and maintain contact throughout their careers.

While the Young Researchers' School essentially targets academics, ProSPER.Net's Leadership Programme fosters a more advanced type of collaboration for sustainability knowledge management for young and aspiring leaders in sustainable development. The intensive training serves as a test-ground for knowledge application through

partnerships with local governments, communities and the private sector. It addresses the lack of opportunity to further local sustainable development, and influence policy and decision-makers. By gathering participants from other ProSPER.Net programmes, the idea is to further enhance the network of researchers and young scholars.

Acquisition, transfer and application of knowledge happen in a wider context and involve diverse people, working in different sectors and experts in different fields. Therefore, capacity building programmes such as those offered by ProSPER.Net consider an educational process that bring together students and young professionals in a meaningful way, especially designed programmes that provide novel opportunities to go beyond one's own field of research to interact with graduates from other fields and sectors. These programmes fulfill the need of a complementary professional education that is hardly offered in more traditional academic settings and that favour dialogue and knowledge exchange on sustainable initiatives among participants and between them and local community (civil society and business). Needless to say, these students and young professionals will be the ones designing policies in the future. The early experience in their training process will likely make them better equipped to address the complex challenges posed by a multi-stakeholder approach, when dealing with sustainability issues.

## **5. Institutional Change - Contributions from ProSPER.Net**

The network's initiatives are examples of how a multilateral collaboration can offer beneficial opportunities in education, research and professional development. ProSPER.Net activities have provided impetus and inspiration for change. It has transformed institutional policy by inviting students, staff and scholars to rethink the role of higher education and the potential impact on society through differentiated educational processes. In this regard, some members reported the creation of entire courses devoted to sustainability, like Universiti Sains Malaysia and the MBA in sustainable development. Indeed, the business project leaders acknowledged that 'Networks such as ProSPER.Net encourage new ways of doing things in business schools, enhancing the ability of educators to be transformative not only of future managers and entrepreneurs, but also of the schools and the staff themselves.'<sup>2</sup> Other members experienced a transformation from a vertically divided education and research

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<sup>2</sup> Igel, B. et al. 'Integrating Sustainability in Asian Business Schools', p. 51.

activities to a more horizontal view that embraces different disciplines and enhances collaboration across departments, as observed in Hosei University's case<sup>3</sup>. As an example, ProSPER.Net has emboldened the Prince of Songkla University towards mainstreaming sustainability in university governance and policies.

ProSPER.Net-member institutions contributed to the development of learning cases for the annual ASEAN+3 Leadership Programme on Sustainable Production and Consumption (SPC), with the objective of influencing policymakers. This is a programme that is offered to middle-to-senior officials of environment ministries or departments, or related government agencies in the ten ASEAN Member States and three dialogue partner countries of China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. The programme has provided the necessary inspiration to develop projects on sustainable production and consumption that effectuate changes in the ASEAN Member States through initiatives of Ministries of Environment and related Ministries, especially under the SWITCH-Asia Policy Support Component of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The programme has also contributed to mainstreaming SPC thinking and practice at the ASEAN level, the ASEAN+3 Leadership Programme being a component of the ASEAN Environmental Education Action Plan (AEEAP 2008-2012; 2014-2018). Other modules in sustainable public policy that were produced for an e-learning course were utilized by the Asian Development Bank in their leadership programme for executive-level government officials – The Asia Leadership Program on Sustainable Development and Climate Change. These are ProSPER.Net initiatives that directly contribute to policymaking processes through building the capacity of policymakers.

The desired transformative change that these network initiatives may generate among the member institutions and the broader academic and scientific communities can only be realized with a long-term perspective. In the meantime, there is also a need to continue further discussion and thinking about knowledge management and structure. Given the challenges that we face, the role of higher education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is more relevant than ever before. In this regard, as a contribution to international debates and processes for policymaking, ProSPER.Net organizes an annual Forum on Sustainability in Higher Education to provide a platform for debate on pertinent issues, particularly targeting the student community. For example, the 2015 Forum discussed

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<sup>3</sup> See Tabucanon, M.; Tanaka, A.C. Networking for ESD: ProSPER.Net's History and Future.

the transformative role of higher education by sharing experiences and examples of good practices of the ProSPER.Net community. The Forum highlighted policy implications, in the context of the Nagoya Declaration on Higher Education for Sustainable Development, and was attended by international participants of the International Student Conference on Environment and Sustainability, hosted by Tongji University, a member of ProSPER.Net. The learning that the students gained from the Forum would go a long way in impacting future thinking and actions in their respective careers.

Adoption of networking as a strategic approach for transforming education and research can generate positive change in society as a whole. It provides a platform for creating opportunities for innovation and change through cross-cultural, multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder dialogues and collaboration. It can effectuate change from practice to policy and vice-versa, through piloting and up-scaling. It recognizes the importance of advancing policy, integrating sustainability in curricula and research, building sustainability competencies of educators, trainers and students, and supporting sustainability efforts of communities and policymakers. An important lesson from ProSPER.Net is that the efficacy of networking in integrating sustainability in programmes and curricula and in the overall engagement of members in network activities lies in the member's commitment and ability to institutionalize ProSPER.Net. The member's participation needs to embrace not just a particular department or academic discipline, but the institution as a whole.

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