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## **United Nations University - Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS)**

### **Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research through Networking (ProSPER.Net)**

#### **1. Background**

This paper attempts to conceptualize and sketch a possible creation of an alliance of higher education institutions in Asia and the Pacific region with the aim to contribute towards building a sustainable future. The paper may be treated as an indicative working document, and by no means definitive, which is designed mainly for initiating a discussion that might hopefully lead to the creation of an innovative academic network for the promotion of sustainability paradigm in postgraduate education and research.

#### **2. Global Efforts on Sustainable Development: Some Historical Perspectives**

The first global conference on Environment was held in 1972 in Stockholm, Sweden. At that Conference, the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was adopted. Two decades later the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. It was there where major agreements on global environmental issues were agreed or signed. One of them was Agenda 21, which is a wide-ranging assessment of the social and economic sectors with goals for improving environmental and developmental impacts of each of the sectors. At the turn of the century, the UN Millennium Summit was convened and approved a declaration that spells out values and principles as well as goals in the key priority areas of peace, development, environment, human rights, and protecting the vulnerable. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to

the world's main development challenges including promotion of poverty reduction, education, health, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and global partnership for development. MDGs represent a global partnership and an agreed set of goals that can be achieved if all actors work together and do their part.

In 2002, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was convened in Johannesburg, South Africa to renew commitment, at the highest level, to sustainable development. The summit sought to overcome the obstacle to achieving sustainable development and to generate initiatives that would deliver results and improve peoples' lives while protecting the environment. In the same year following WSSD, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution to launch the Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (DESD, 2005-2014) with UNESCO as lead UN agency. As a response to the challenges of ESD and DESD, the United Nations University through its Institute of Advanced Studies (UNU-IAS) initiated the Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (EfSD). The EfSD Programme has a two-step approach – first to provide intellectual and conceptual reflections on challenges of ESD and second, to assist in actual implementation of the ESD initiatives. The five EfSD Programme areas are; i) advocacy and dissemination of ESD and DESD, ii) promotion of regional centres of expertise on ESD (RCE) and their networking, iii) strengthening of ESD activities of higher education institutions, iv) further development of on-line learning for ESD, and v) training of teachers and trainers on ESD.

The Asia-Pacific region is undergoing rapid development and there is serious concern over rapid environmental degradation causing damage to society and the economy, thereby undermining global sustainability. From the human resource standpoint, there is a need to develop environmental leaders equipped with the skills in taking actions for greening economic and social systems. Higher education institutions can play a central role in developing environmental leaders who integrates environmental considerations with economic and societal development.

The Asia-Pacific Forum for Environment and Development (APFED) made recommendations in its Final Report of 2004 to strengthen higher education for sustainable development through various measures, including the establishment of an inter-university accreditation system and advanced postgraduate ESD courses.

ECO ASIA (Environment Congress for Asia and the Pacific) have also recognised the importance of networks of higher education institutions for integrating sustainability in higher education in response to the challenges resulting from rapid and uneven growth in the Asia-Pacific region.

Evidently there is a moral imperative for higher education institutions to be actively engaged in promoting, integrating and mainstreaming sustainability concepts and practices into teaching and research, hinging primarily on the notion that the

satisfaction of present-generation needs should not compromise the fulfillment of future-generation needs. This new education paradigm invokes in a holistic manner explicit consideration of the three pillars of sustainability - Environment, Economy, and Society.

### **3. Higher Education Institutions and Need for Change**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) can potentially play important roles in imparting the sustainability education paradigm upon society and in integrating the notion into educational programmes and systems. Albeit with varying levels of capacities, they are ideally knowledge providers and their roles to effectuate societal changes can be immense. Schools systems may potentially reach out to HEIs for inspiration, guidance and learning spaces for the advancement of knowledge for moving towards a sustainable future.

HEIs are in positions to assume “leadership by example” role, to practice what they preach through reform of their own curricula for others to emulate or draw inspirations from. Courses design and the systemic structuring of curricula should be attuned to the sustainability principles. This demonstration of leadership can trickle down to other school systems through teachers and other professionals who received formal education under the reformed curricula.

HEIs ought to also invest in non-degree and degree ESD courses in order to impress the importance of sustainability upon working professionals and apply the notion in workplaces. These courses, also increasingly offered as on-line learning, should be tailored to cater to agents of change in non-formal and informal education sectors, embracing the training-the-trainers strategy to enhance multiplying effects.

The quest for knowledge is a perpetual process, and so are societies’ aspirations for attaining better quality of life. Discoveries of new knowledge and their applications to problems of society are integral to the functionality of higher education institutions. New analytical tools and techniques that accommodate consideration of sustainability issues must be continuously developed. Research questions, such as to improve efficiency in the utilization of resources, to search for innovative methods of environmental protection, to develop comprehensive assessment indicators based on the distinct pillars of sustainability, and to find new approaches towards the rational utilization of the planet’s resources for the benefit of all of humanity, are among a host of countless important and vital research issues that must be vigorously addressed. There is no question that research and education are intertwined and need to be viewed holistically.

### **4. Institutional Tools of Change**

Building academic alliances for promoting sustainability paradigm in postgraduate education and research can and should enhance global ESD effort. The strategy optimizes utilization of resources as well as reduces or eliminates duplications. The “sharing of resources and knowledge” and “learning from each other” approaches are important ingredients of success.

In the face of globalization, there are trends towards regional integration. Collaborative alliances that initially were focusing exclusively on economic development can no longer ignore sustainability considerations. HEIs are beginning to respond to this trend. For example, the European Tempus programme facilitates collaboration between European universities in order to “facilitate university modernisation, mutual learning between regions and peoples and understanding between cultures”. The Asia-Pacific region is recognised as critically important for global sustainability because of its rapid and uneven growth resulting in the potentially dramatic environmental degradation, social disparities, human rights violations and many other concerns. HEIs of the Asia-Pacific Region should address sustainability issues taking into consideration perspective of the whole region and its interactions with the world.

## **5. Higher Education Institutions Committed to Change: A New UNU-IAS Networking Initiative**

The new UNU-IAS initiative is called **ProSPER.Net**, which stands for **Promotion of Sustainability in Postgraduate Education and Research Network**. Societies need not only survive but also prosper in pursuit of better quality of life and for a sustainable future.

ProSPER.Net intends to build linkages with other similar networks, and by design these networks may share a number of common members. Three such closely related networks are the Asia-Pacific Initiative (API) of UNU, Asia-Pacific Regional University Consortium (RUC) of UNEP, and the Asia-Pacific Regional Network of Teacher Education Institutes (TEIs) for ESD (ESD-Net) of UNESCO. While the three similar networks have their respective thrusts – API on distance learning, RUC mainly on environment for sustainable development at all levels of education and research, and ESD-Net on coordination of efforts by member TEIs – ProSPER.Net is designed to establish a niche in the areas of postgraduate education and research on sustainable development.

ProSPER.Net is an inclusive network of committed higher education institutions that will pursue curriculum reform to integrate the sustainability agenda into postgraduate courses, curricula and programmes. This consortium will undertake collaborative research on ESD and SD.

ProSPER.Net is comprised of leading academic institutions in Asia and the Pacific region. Many of them are institutions with strong education and research programmes in SD-related fields and offer postgraduate courses in these fields. Some of the initial partners are active stakeholders of Regional Centres of Expertise (RCEs) on ESD.

ProSPER.Net exists by virtue of its Charter signed by the founding members. The governance and management of ProSPER.Net are the responsibilities of the Board comprised of representatives of Board-member institutions selected by the General Assembly of network members. The secretariat is UNU-IAS or another member institution decided by the General Assembly. The policies and procedures of ProSPER.Net, in the form of by-laws, will be devised by the Board.

## **6. Some Collaborative Change Modalities**

ProSPER.Net aims at establishing a platform of collaboration for members in pursuit of postgraduate education and research on SD and ESD. Collaborative activities should be innovative and members ought to be prepared to commit their time, energy and resources to effectuate change.

In the postgraduate education front, the sustainability education paradigm should be integrated in all levels – course, curriculum and programme. At the course level, instructors play a critical role in relating the subject topics with the pillars of sustainability. It would be useful to embark on faculty awareness and development programmes on sustainability. At the curriculum level, a course or courses on sustainable development may be made compulsory. At the programme or institution level, a programme on SD or a related programme with SD orientation may be developed. In all of these levels, the approach should be that of mainstreaming sustainable development principles.

Education and research are inseparable - one reinforces the other especially at the postgraduate level where research is normally integral to the curriculum. Student interest to carry out SD-related research may come naturally as a byproduct of mainstreaming SD in courses, curricula and programmes. The research results should be used as teaching materials. Course instructors are generally handicapped by being ill-equipped with sound illustrative cases to support SD theory in classroom teaching.

It is expected that ProSPER.Net's collaborative activities include, but not limited to, the following:

- Holding of annual sustainable development colloquia to share information, experiences and discuss potential collaborative activities for postgraduate education and research.
- Establishing a sustainable development summer school where courses are offered by a group of faculty members from the network.

The courses offered in the summer school may be credit-earning towards the degree requirement in the student's home institution.

- Enabling student mobility on sustainable development by developing a credit-transfer system among members.

A credit-transfer system of sustainable development and related postgraduate courses would enhance student exchange. Student mobility can be impeded by the lack of institutional mutual recognition of courses and transfer of credits.

- Enabling faculty mobility on sustainable development by developing faculty exchange schemes.

Faculty exchange provides impetus for resource and knowledge sharing, information exchange and creates an atmosphere of intellectual camaraderie among members that could lead to joint research and other academic endeavors.

- Developing common basic courses on sustainable development.

These courses will be jointly developed and delivered by member institutions for their students. The courses may be available on a face-to-face mode or online mode. These courses will thus be available to classes comprising of multi-institutional students.

- Collaborating in developing sustainable development courses in each of the member institutions.

Each member institution's SD offerings could be designed and delivered in collaboration with other network institutions. This approach would allow each member to take advantage of expertise available within the network.

- Creating a consortium of business schools to mainstream sustainable development in business and management curricula.

The consortium may also include business schools of institutions outside of ProSPER.Net.

- Creating a facility for joint outreach activities.

The facility will provide opportunity for those who are unable to follow formal degree-level education programmes by organizing short-term training courses especially for practicing professionals.

- Building alliances with business and industry.

This may be linked with the business school consortium. The business sector indeed has an important role to play. Some business enterprises are already accommodating corporate social responsibility (CSR) in their strategy. Addressing sustainability, however, is broader than just supporting SD-related activities of society. It also involves, among others, assuming responsibility in embracing SD-friendly designs of products as well as in demonstrating and practicing the principles of sustainable production and consumption.

## **6. Concluding Remarks**

ProSPER.Net, which is under the auspices of UNU-IAS, is expected to accommodate more institutions into the future. The “glue that binds” is the members’ collective commitment to uphold the vision and aspiration of creating a sustainable world for all societies and for all generations, and in order to attain a sustainable world, ESD is a pathway that involves the active participation of higher education institutions. ProSPER.Net adopts a charter as an article of faith and commitment.

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