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2025 ECOSOC Partnership Forum Side Event

ESD and higher education: Reflections on an evolving field

4 February, 2025, 9:00 EST, Virtual

Organized by: UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), York University, Columbia University, UNESCO

Background on the event

This event served as a preview for a special issue of the Journal of Education for Sustainable Development expected to be published in March/April 2025. The special issue, representing scholars in 9 countries from over 21 institutions, will present a range of perspectives on education for sustainable development (ESD), encouraging the ongoing and critical dialogue needed to advance sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions. The special issue ultimately aims to offer suggestions for better pathways forward, in addition to serving as a space for debate related to ESD priorities and plans for implementation, particularly within the framework of the SDGs. To preview the special issue, speakers focused on the role of ESD in higher education, discussing successes and opportunities for improvement. They proposed innovative solutions to better incorporate ESD in higher education and how higher education institutions can be pivotal in the fight against the climate crisis.

Key Issues discussed

- ESD empowers learners to contribute to a more inclusive, just, and sustainable world. Higher education has the potential to contribute to implementing ESD globally through a holistic and transdisciplinary approach to make education more relevant to current global challenges.
- Universities are now market reliant institutions focused more on economic issues rather than ethical issues. The colonial model of higher education is extractive and exploits

knowledge and resources. Planetary consciousness is essential to understand that we are all connected biologically, and we must value diverse knowledge systems and perspectives.

- ESD needs to be underscored by a notion of ubuntu in order to work on the African continent and elsewhere. Ubuntu reinforces the values of dignity, mutuality, and justice for all. People recognize each other as equal human beings despite disagreements.
- Inclusive economic growth does not include non-human species nor future humans. They are not represented in democratic processes. The SDGs focus mainly on use of resources, thus sustaining development unfortunately often means sustaining unsustainable systems.
- Higher education networks work together to share a common framework of ESD and can implement ESD differently according to national and regional contexts. Networks share resources, improve schools, and broaden opportunities for research and learning.
- We cannot educate ourselves out of the climate crisis nor can we further ourselves to make progress on these challenges with solely education. Higher education institutions take actions and make an impact on the climate crisis and global challenges through community engagement, research contributions, and knowledge mobilization.

Key recommendations for action

- Higher education institutions can accelerate ESD with whole institution approaches by integrating ESD into the curriculum, fostering interdisciplinary learning, and empowering students to become responsible global citizens. Universities should be agents of planetary repair.
- To cultivate critical thinkers that understand and contribute to creating a more just and sustainable world, education institutions need to decolonize curricula and embrace pluralistic curricula that give a role to diverse knowledge systems. Additionally, there should be a focus on pedagogies of care and interconnectedness to critically engage on environmental issues, as well as ethically engaged research.
- Ubuntu as an African philosophy of education can be used to create transformation not only in Africa, but globally. People need to deliberate equally and mutually with the intent to bring about transformative change in ESD. Engagement needs to be deliberate and intentional.
- ESD needs to focus on teaching for alternative economies. Teaching needs to go back to environmental education approximately 50 years ago where planet was foundational.
- Higher education networks need to be established and fostered to share and develop common frameworks and transdisciplinary curricula for ESD. There should be a shift from a competitive paradigm to a collaborative paradigm in higher education.