

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: EDUCATION, SOCIETY, TECHNOLOGIES,  
ECONOMY, ECOLOGY ♦ BELARUS, MINSK, MARCH, 2011**

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**JOS H.A.N. RIKERS EDUCATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN  
EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION**

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*Анализируется проблема устойчивого развития системы высшего образования в Европейском Союзе. Приводятся примеры преобразований университетов для обеспечения их соответствия современным требованиям.*

**Need for change.** The word sustainable refers to a situation that can continue. In relation to Planet Earth it implies that the human inhabitants of the planet will have to learn how to live together in peace, dignity and mutual respect without causing irreversible damage to it by their production and consumption activities. Three most important aspects in that context are ecology, economy and culture.

Society is facing the 21st century's problems that require a change into a situation of more sustainable development. Path-breaking solutions conceived in terms of fundamentally different sets of technologies, institutions and social arrangements are needed. Sustainable development therefore is a challenge at all levels of scale, micro, meso and macro, characterized by the need for long term approaches and the involvement of many stakeholders with often conflicting interests. The inherent complexity and uncertainty of the challenges asks for fundamental changes, not just for incremental changes leading to optimization within established frameworks. Transitions resulting in structural change and changes in framing conditions are needed. The type of innovations needed cannot be restricted to designing and evaluating solutions, but must also engage with a process of paradigmatic change. This strategic management challenge requires special ways of working. Visions of sustainable futures have to be created, the dynamics of co-evolutionary change on several innovation fronts have to be handled, the inherent uncertainty of change has to be faced and the communication about options and their implications with stakeholders and decisions makers has to be organized.

It is the task of Higher Education to provide and transfer the knowledge to handle this type of changes. To provide this knowledge to students, our future decision makers, but also to cooperate with stakeholders in society to provide this knowledge now.

**Response to the need for change.** Looking at education for sustainable development in European Higher Education is therefore a search for the response to the challenge for change. A change with the magnitude as is envisioned here, requires a broad approach and complex arrangements. In fact the need for change and the commitment for change have to be embedded in all levels (micro, meso, macro) to succeed. In this presentation the search starts by looking at the policy framework on Sustainable Development both on the European and at the national level. Within this framework institutions in Higher Education have their own responsibility to respond to the challenge for change.

Traditionally Higher Education institutions have a threefold agenda consisting of research, education and community engagement. Looking at these three main activity areas gives a clear overview of the actual activities and the structural commitment to change for sustainable development.

**From activities on sustainable development to activities for sustainable development.** In general the European tradition to worry about the environment (initiated by the Report of the Club of Rome) has been translated into activities by the European Higher Education institutions. Solid research agendas have been established in the field of environmental research and other disciplines. New educational programs have been developed and are offered across Europe to educate the new generations in a more sustainable way. Community based projects and non-formal and informal education is being implemented to meet the challenge. One fundamental aspect however is not included in the process on a structural basis. Most solutions and initiatives are positioned within the existing framework of the traditional university. This means: subject oriented, fragmented and rather theoretical.

As has been argued in the introduction a paradigm shift is needed. A shift from research and education on sustainable development to research and education for sustainable development. In this presentation we will deliberate on the meaning of this fundamental shift, mostly using examples.

**Examples.** Examples of developments on a European scale, originating from universities in Europe (and around the world) are pro-

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vided to show that the need for fundamental change is understood and the search for answers is on its way. The following developments will be addressed:

1. The Copernicus Alliance.
2. The European (and Global) network of Regional Centres of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development.